

# Learning Networks

## A Chinese Model of Collective Impact

## Introduction

It's been a common belief that the predominance of government in social and political affairs so overshadows Chinese NGOs that their activities, growth, ability secure funding, and engagement with domestic and international organizations is completely defined and controlled by this. Indeed, donors are often under constant scrutiny in China, and NGOs have been closed for accepting their funds. Nevertheless, there are many instances where domestic networks and international NGOs work directly with Chinese government ministries and provincial authorities who welcome aid and take credit for positive results (Wells-Dang).

We found that many civil society networks in China have moved beyond the “command and control” model and are thriving. Many Chinese networks and organizations are large, professional, and long-standing. This sophistication applies not only to NGOs and government organized NGOs (GONGOs), but also to think tanks, with their relatively high levels of scholarship and academic freedom. In particular, the prevalence of approaches such as the Collective Impact approach and Learning Networks have contributed to the expansion and increased effectiveness of Chinese NGOs, as well as their ability to interact and work with organizations and funders both domestically and abroad.

## Chinese NGOs: A Brief Historical Perspective

Recent surveys count approximately 400,000 registered social organizations in China (Gao and Young 2008). About half of these are NGOs (Chan 2005). Considering the population of China and the high levels of volunteering (2000 World Values Survey), most people we spoke to with links to civil society estimate that there are over one million registered and unregistered social organizations operating across China.

During the 1980s, Chinese society liberalized significantly, and the first independent Chinese NGOs, such as the Amity Foundation, formed during this time. These “drops in the Ocean” (Howell 1996, Wells-Dang) expanded when political space opened in the 1990s. China's best-known environmental NGO, Friends of Nature, was formed in 1994 by a strong, charismatic government advisor, Liang Congjie. This was a takeoff year for Chinese environmental organizations and in comparison to other sector leaders, Chinese

environmental NGOs and GONGOs enjoyed relative freedom. International NGOs with surprisingly activist credentials, such as Greenpeace, have also worked hard to establish a presence in China. Most notably, in campaigns against issues such as water pollution prevention, variant soya patenting, and the shipping of Australian electronic waste to China, Greenpeace's operations have appealed to Chinese national consciousness. According to the organization, when drafting a new law to promote renewable energy, Greenpeace was the only NGO consulted in 2006 by the Chinese National People's Congress (Radkau).

Alongside these older and more celebrated institutions like Friends of Nature and Greenpeace, our research identified another class of organizations: informal path-breakers who engage in organizational networking activities that have striking similarities with Collective Impact approaches in the West. Collective Impact occurs when organizations agree to solve a specific social problem using a common agenda, aligning their efforts, and using common measures of success.

The Collective Impact approach has been energetically promoted by systems-thinkers who argue that organizations are no longer about "four walls", but are embedded within, and change, entire systems. Capacity development, they argue, is holistic and looks at organizations in relation to the larger ecosystem in which they are embedded. In the case of China, these ecosystems include both registered and unregistered social organizations, policy-makers, Party elites, external stakeholders, funders, and, of course, community actors. This view sees individual, organizational, and network level capacity emerging *from* and experienced *through* interaction. These interactions include exchanges among people from within organizations (internal stakeholders) as well as exchanges that link internal and external stakeholders (Levinger and Bloom 2011).

Collective impact is a significant shift from the social sector's current paradigm, because the underlying premise of collective impact is that no single organization can create large-scale, lasting social change alone. There is no "silver bullet" solution to systemic social problems or intransigent elites, and these problems cannot be solved by simply scaling or replicating one organization or program. Strong organizations are necessary but not sufficient for large-scale social change (Kania and Kramer 2011).

But does collective impact fit the Chinese cultural, social and political landscape? Nina Zhou, a former Communications Associate of BSR's CiYuan program (see our Discussion Paper on Partnerships for more on CiYuan), in a blog post titled, "Why China's Social Sector Can't Achieve Collective Impact", argues that the phrase "collective impact" has become a buzzword in the West, but is untested in China. She cites two main barriers: 1) the lack of horizontal collaboration among grassroots NGOs and 2) the lack of organizations with the capacity to serve as a "backbone" to create and manage collective impact initiatives. What Zhou may not know is that a positively deviant strategy of joint action is emerging that has already led to significant policy changes and a better quality of life for thousands.

This paper explores the work of the Capacity Building and Assessment Centre (CBAC), a registered Chinese NGO, whose work launching and supporting their Learning Networks model has led to hundreds of formal and informal exchanges between social organizations operating in 12 Provinces of China. We begin by briefly describing the Learning Networks approach and the impacts achieved to date. We then introduce the Collective Impact Model and compare and contrast the framework with the Learning Networks launched by CBAC. Finally, we offer a set of conditions that are critical for realizing collective impact in China.

## Learning Networks, In Brief

Before explaining the nature and function of Learning Networks, we will introduce the key leaders of the organizations we studied:

- *Zhan Tau* balances her job as a television commentator in Shanxi with her responsibilities as Secretary General of the Psychological Problems Services Alliance, an organization with 500 members focused on improving services to children with autism. Ten years ago, Tau, the mother of an autistic son, was alone and struggling to keep her social organization La La Shou ("Join Hands") from closing down for lack of money and space.
- *Yang Yun Biao* is a trainer to Farmer Associations nationwide, who successfully launched 15 networks consisting of 95 Farmer Associations. Fifteen years ago, desperate and uneducated, Biao was arrested and sent to the countryside for staging protests in Tiananmen Square over the selling of farmland by state actors for factory development in Anhui.

- *Wang Fang* is the founder of the first Cerebral Palsy (CP) network in China with 45 organizational members and a new general support grant for 2 million RMB. Just a few years ago, Fang, the mother of twin girls, one with Cerebral Palsy, could find no one interested in supporting the CP cause.

Tau, Biao and Fang are all leaders of Learning Networks, an initiative of the Capacity Building and Assessment Centre (CBAC). CBAC is a Chinese NGO that provides performance improvement services to strengthen the capacity of local and international NGOs in China. Originally founded in 2001 as the China field office of Pact (an international NGO), CBAC was formally registered as a Chinese NGO in 2005. CBAC has guided hundreds of organizations and launched and supported nine learning networks, including Tau's Heming Autism Services Sector Learning Network, Biao's Farmers Cooperatives Learning Network, and Fang's Cerebral Palsy Rehabilitation Learning Network.

## **How and Why Learning Networks Developed**

**Learning Networks (LN)** emerged out of a need to solve the common challenges of social development NGOs between 2001 and 2005: Low organizational capacity, a highly restrictive government policy environment, low human capacity, low levels of trust and a highly competitive environment for limited funding. During these years, grantees competed fiercely to explain how their individual activities produced the greatest effect. When a grantee was asked to evaluate the impact of its work, every attempt was made to isolate the grantee's individual influence from all other variables.

In this climate, many of the Chinese NGOs were working at odds with each other. A turning point came in 2004 when CBAC hosted a self-assessment process for nine organizations to encourage them to reflect on their organizational capacity. Zhan Tau, the Executive Director of La La Shou was at the CBAC-led event, where she and the leaders of eight other NGOs discussed capacity gaps, funding challenges and the barriers to open sharing between peer organizations. For three days, NGO leaders shared details about their organizational assets and their biggest challenges. The more the leaders talked, the more the discussion shifted from an "isolated impact" mindset, grounded in the assumption of funding solutions embodied in a single institution, to a "network mindset", which elevates the importance of

intangibles, such as trusting relationships and tapping into the power of social bridging and bonding social capital.

CBAC had discovered in this three-day capacity assessment and reflection process a safe way for Chinese NGOs to share data about their performance, as well as a way to motivate NGO leaders to collaborate on shared concerns. The core attributes of this LN model eventually emerged over the next few years through programmatic experimentation with dozens of Chinese social organizations. However, *the single most important developmental innovation* to the LN model was made when CBAC took explicit steps to convene thematic groups of NGOs *who were working on the same sectorial challenges* or issues, including health and safety, agriculture and economic development, HIV prevention, environmental protection and the rights of autistic children.

One of the most dramatic examples of LN impact has come from the Autism Learning Network. When Zhou Tau collaborated with Tian Hui Ping, another parent of an autistic child and the leader of an organization called Stars and Rain, they and others found a common cause and tapped into funding and the capacity building services of CBAC. Stars and Rain quickly grew from 8 to 45 staff and together with CBAC they launched the first Learning Network for Autism. Membership over the first two years grew from 15 organizations to 450 organizations under the name of Heart Alliance. Four new autism LNs in Beijing, Henan, and anchors in the Northwest and Southwest were added in the third year of Heart Alliance, each working semi- autonomously with new partners from their home provinces. The structure, principles, decision-making systems and activities of the new regional hubs were established locally without any direct support or money from Heart Alliance.

## **Learning Networks Advanced and Expanded**

By 2008, nearly 1000 autism organizations were participating in the LN, where they shared their experiences, expertise and knowledge, and offered each other emotional support. Their galvanizing common agenda included: a) increasing the quality of services for autistic children by establishing professional standards of care; and b) increase the social awareness and governmental acceptance of autism. Their actions and unity received a big boost when the One Foundation gave the organization one million RMB to continue their

work. Today, government is moving fast to take credit for this work, with the China Disabled Persons Federation (CDPF), a GONGO, establishing a new association for autism to better to connect government actors and to coordinate support services nationwide. The government has also committed to an investment of 432 million RMB to help 360,000 autistic children between the ages of 0 and 6. For the first time, children diagnosed with autism will be eligible for subsidized health care services.

## Core Attributes of the Effective Learning Networks

Using a process called Outcome Harvesting, the Root Change gleaned information from reports and personal interviews to document how LNs contributed to observed outcomes. We were particularly concerned with understanding the process of change and how each outcome contributes to this change, rather than accumulating a comprehensive list of results. The harvested information went through a winnowing process during which time we attempted to substantiate conclusions by comparing it to information collected from knowledgeable, independent sources. Due to local concerns about anonymity, many of the LN principals and key informants were reluctant to speak directly with the Root Change team. The substantiated information we gathered was analyzed and interpreted at the level of core attributes that contribute to mission, goals or strategies of each LN. The following three conditions emerged as core attributes of the most successful learning networks:

***Bonding Social Capital:*** New and emerging local organizations prioritized community outreach and partnership efforts, cultivating purposeful linkages with known elites at the local level so that they can better tell the story of their constituent's needs. By building deep and meaningful ties with existing partners (bonding social capital), they leveraged new relationships and were able to reach out to a broader network of prospective institutional champions and funders. Tactics included tapping into personal connections with sympathetic officials, embedded advocacy with GONGOs at conferences and accessing personal ties with journalists.

***Bridging Social Capital:*** Established NGOs and institutions who are central actors and opinion leaders in the LN leveraged their "bridging social capital" in order to facilitate connections between struggling local organizations on the periphery of the LN and high-value resources and institutions. Tactics included direct lobbying of government officials on

behalf of local organizations, connecting LN members at workshops and training events, making written and telephone introductions and sharing contacts at funding agencies.

**Meritocracy:** Defying most of our assumptions about Chinese institutions, emerging local organizations, particularly at the provincial levels, enjoyed enhanced status among their peers as they took on the roles and responsibilities of opinion leaders at the local level. Through the informal structure of the LN, each organization or individual member took the lead on a specific action, and others would support them as they were able. As cycles of activism rise and fall over time, members acted as leaders in some areas and followers in others.

When these three attributes were present, LNs were better able to reach out to a new potential partner or an influential policy maker in an ever-expanding circle of connections. CBAC discovered that the “fringe status” of local LN members could be relatively short lived when organizations connected with an actor of influence or attained knowledge through an effort of targeted linkages. Natural clusters of intense connectivity formed around common challenges and issue areas, and then shifted as problems were resolved.

## Learning Networks: A Chinese Model of Collective Impact

The literature on Collective Impact identifies three critical preconditions that must be in place before launching a collective impact initiative: *an influential champion*, *adequate financial resources*, and a *sense of urgency for change*. Together, these preconditions create the opportunity and motivation necessary to bring people who have never before worked together into a collective impact initiative and hold them in place until the initiative’s own momentum takes over (Kania and Kramer Stanford Innovation Review 2011).

The **most critical precondition** cited is the presence of an *influential champion* (or small group of champions) who commands the respect necessary to bring senior leadership together and keep their active engagement over time. Initially, CBAC played the role of convener and champion. Their credentials as an elite capacity building organization with unique learning technologies from the West helped to create the kind of reputation necessary to launch and sustain LNs. The Executive Director, Zhang Jufang, also enjoyed an excellent reputation with international agencies and foundations, including Ford.



However, with each successful LN, new thematic champions emerged from within the ranks. These influential players came from unexpected places and are represented by people like Tau, Biao and Fang. Indeed, charismatic leaders from Friends of Nature, who worked with CBAC to launch their own environmental LN struggled with the old habits of command and control and failed to achieve the scale and impact of the autism LN.

The **second precondition** for collective impact is adequate *financial resources* for at least two to three years, generally in the form of at least one anchor funder who is engaged from the beginning and can support and mobilize other resources to pay for the needed infrastructure and planning processes. CBAC, as the backbone organization to multiple LNs, was initially responsible for all of the fundraising. Eventually, they were able to attract support from the International Republican Institute, Ford and the One Foundation. Nonetheless, CBAC was often stretched thin as demand for their services grew. CBAC found that, over time, new funders were most interested in funding frontline actors in the LN and began to take for granted the services of the LN anchor. The lack of understanding in China of the critical role that the “backbone” organization plays in a collective impact model is a potential impediment to the sustainability of new initiatives. *Funders need to pay attention to the importance of backbone organizations who provide overall strategic direction, facilitate dialogue between the members, manage data collection and analysis, handle communications, coordinate outreach and mobilize assets for additional funding.*

The **third precondition** is the *urgency for change* around an issue. This condition certainly played out within the Autism and the Cerebral Palsy LNs, where families with direct relatives with autism or CP were fully motivated around a change agenda. Successful LNs, however, balanced the urgency for change with the need to establish boundary rules. When CBAC launched their first HIV/AIDS LN, the key constituencies, including sex workers, safe blood advocates and child welfare groups splintered. The issues these groups cared most about were specific to their own constituencies and they ultimately went on to create three smaller LNs of like-minded people, collectively representing 2000 organizations across China. *Boundaries for backbone organizations or LN champions should center on a few simple rules to guide them through the chaos, including clarifying which issues can be pursued, with whom (target constituencies), and in what regions.*

Our research on learning networks and our subsequent guidance on implementing collective impact in China indicates a **fourth precondition** -- the continuous commitment to the improvement of LN backbone organization capacity. These organizations need to cultivate the legitimacy necessary to lead within a cluster of like-minded organizations by:

- Demonstrating commitment towards inclusion and building effective, sustainable relationships with constituency members;
- Serving as a repository for institutional knowledge about the LN;
- Facilitating knowledge sharing throughout the network or coalition;
- Demonstrating ability to manage donor funding, issue sub-grants and fulfill reporting requirements; and
- Promoting the success of LN members, even at the expense of minimizing their own contributions.

Effective backbone organizations should have sound systems, policies, and procedures, but most importantly they need to be adaptive and well prepared to function in a messy world of rapid change and complexity (e.g. Hong Kong). Effective backbone organizations focus outwardly and cultivate extensive stakeholder involvement. They emphasize impact by forging alliances, brokering, leveraging resources, partnering, and engaging in embedded advocacy with well-placed elites. They take measures to build resiliency by investing in social capital (bonds of trust and connection) both internally and externally with their partners and other key actors. *Internal social capital* helps the backbone organization to attract and retain gifted personnel, as demonstrated by CBAC's success and longevity, even after the departure of Pact in 2004. *External social capital* allows the organization to affect change through productive alliances with supporters, policy-makers, colleague organizations and—most importantly—the people served through their programs. Champions of the Autism LN spent considerable social capital building relationships with elites embedded in the China Disabled Persons Federation and the China Association of Persons with Psychiatric Disability and their Relatives. Ultimately, a number of LN members parlayed this into free office space and money from provincial governments.

Below are categories of Organizational Development (OD) interventions that are identified as effective strategies for strengthening LN Backbone Organizations:

- Intergroup interventions improve interactions of interdependent groups to enhance their effectiveness (e.g., intergroup conflict resolution, networking among groups).
- Learning interventions further develop skills and knowledge, and/or change attitudes and perceptions of an organization's members (e.g., technical skills training, diversity workshops).
- Strategic and action planning interventions facilitate the development of an organization's shared vision and mission, and strategic and action plan processes (e.g., open-systems planning, partnership mapping).
- Structural and work process interventions enhance the effectiveness of a system by re-aligning organizational structure or by changing the way work is done (e.g., work redesign, structural change).
- Team-building interventions augment performance of intact work groups (e.g., team action planning, team mission development).

## Conclusion

Root Change has written extensively about the profound importance that 2.0 capacities have on social change efforts, including relationship and trust building among diverse stakeholders, leadership development and creating a culture of learning. The successful LNs we observed each had practitioners with many of these attributes and we believe they are an essential components of their collective efforts. Many of the LN initiatives we examined are already showing concrete results, reinforcing the promise of collective impact models in China. Our examination of the LN approach suggests that, under the right conditions, Chinese social organizations can find the space to organize and scale operations, even if that means following a guiding principle best expressed as “Be of help, but don’t make trouble; get involved, but don’t interfere, act, but don’t cause offense.” (Radkau). They have also shown the capacity to develop new habits that include horizontal collaboration. Finally, CBAC has demonstrated a pathway for other organizations to follow as they develop the competencies necessary to serve as a “backbone” to create and manage collective impact initiatives.

## Recommendations

Though there are barriers to developing and sustaining effective learning networks in China, the following recommendations for action amongst donors and capacity development practitioners would go far in ameliorating concerns and eliminating barriers:

### **To support the adoption of the Collective Impact approach and support “backbone” organizations:**

- Develop awareness campaigns to acquaint local NGOs with the benefits of the CI approach for addressing pressing social issues. Awareness can be cultivated through competitions with prize money; dissemination of success stories; and the use of other communications vehicles to shed light on the trade-offs that local NGOs make when they embrace a CI approach.
- Use network analytics, peer nominations, and related methods to “discover” organizations with the potential to assume the “backbone” role.
- Develop “fast track” initiatives to prepare promising organizations for the “backbone” role.

### **To support the core attributes of social capital and adaptiveness:**

- Introduce metrics that help LNs track the extent to which they are generating new social capital and embracing adaptive behaviors.
- Encourage, disseminate and support LN structures that are flat, non-hierarchical, agile, and flexible.

### **To increase the capacity development of backbone organizations and network champions:**

- Develop estimates for what it costs to support backbone organizational development at different stages of an LN’s evolution. This information could be used to ground donors more thoroughly in the realities of what it takes to ensure that the backbone role is properly filled by qualified organizations.
- Seed and pilot new LN initiatives and develop and test criteria for ascertaining “LN readiness.”

**To increase critical capacities, such as membership diversity, key constituencies, knowledge sharing, and management of donor funds:**

- Design and deliver specialized capacity development programs that prepare organizations to assume the backbone function. Such programs may include—but should not be limited to—training modules.
- Develop evidence-based self-assessment tools that can be used by backbone organizations to determine how well they are doing in carrying out their functions and what their capacity development priorities should be in order to support the goal of continuous improvement.

## **Next Steps**

We recommend convening a “data jam” with CBAC and representatives of several of the Learning Networks to further unpack these findings and explore their significance.

Questions and activities that such an event might focus on include:

- Determining how the attributes of effective LNs can be used to guide the selection of future “backbone” organizations and well placed champions;
- Ground testing the space for a LN with a marine conservation focus;
- Conducting a deeper assessment of the mechanisms necessary to generate and sustain LN member motivation;
- Identifying pathways for strengthening ties to key actors in the relevant ecosystem; and
- Developing effective strategies for mitigating risks associated with advocacy work in China.