

A nascent civil society within a transforming environment

CIVICUS Civil Society Index Report China (Mainland)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Currently, China is undergoing a dynamic process of social and economic transformation, in which civil society is playing an increasingly important role. Within such a fast developing context, the Civil Society Index (CSI) project was carried out to evaluate the current state of civil society in China.

Since 1978, civil society in China has greatly benefited from reform policies in the economic and social spheres. Particularly since the 1990s, the number and variety of civil society organisations (CSOs), and their role in society at large, has significantly increased. CSOs' activities cover a wide range of issues in China, while they are particularly well-represented in the fields of environmental protection, poverty alleviation, trade promotion and community development.

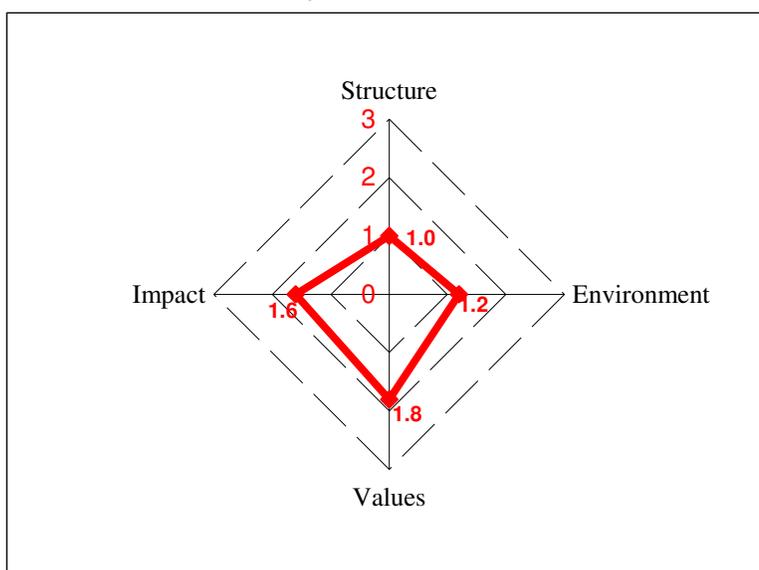
Officially, there are three types of CSOs within the Chinese context, which are called “Civilian Organisations” (Min Jian Zu Zhi). They are *social organisations*, which are membership-based entities; *foundations*, which are fund-based; and *civilian non-enterprise units*, which have a public interest objective, such as private schools, non-profit hospitals and social service agencies. At the end of 2005, there were 168,000 Social organisations, 146,000 Civilian Non-enterprise Units and 999 Foundations in China. Many of these organisations were set up by government and party authorities before the reform and open policies, and they are currently in the process of transformation. Since the start of the Reform process, a significant number of grassroots CSOs have emerged.

The Civil Society Index was implemented in China by NGO Research Centre at Tsinghua University from late 2003 to late 2005. Guided by a National Advisory group (NAG), the project collected a variety of data, including Regional Stakeholder Consultations covering 6 provinces and 11 cities, Community Surveys

conducted in 6 provinces, media review with 5 different media, and the Secondary Data Review, etc. Based on the available data, the NAG met to score the 72 indicators that assess the status of civil society in four dimensions, namely the structure, environment, values and impact. The results for these four dimensions can be depicted in the form of a Diamond (See figure 1).

Figure 1 shows the Chinese Civil Society Diamond, with the scores of

FIGURE 1: Civil Society Diamond for China



1.0 for the Structure dimension, 1.2 for the Environment dimension, 1.6 for the Impact dimension and 1.8 for the Values dimension. The graph reflects that Chinese civil society has achieved a medium or slightly above medium level in the areas of Impact and Values, whereas its structure and environment are still rather weak.

The Civil Society Diamond depicts a better performance in its Impact dimension than in its Structure dimension, which seems to indicate that CSOs are able to exert stronger influence on society than their own organisational and sectoral structure and resources would suggest. The weakness in structure is particularly due to limited citizen participation, low levels of CSO membership, and limited organisation of CSOs in networks, umbrella and apex bodies and the inadequacy of resources.

Chinese civil society scores best on its Values dimension, which indicates that many CSOs are driven by positive values, such as organisational membership and gender equitable practices. Negative values, such as violence, intolerance and gender discrimination are not very visible in China. CSOs play a strong role in promoting commitments to poverty eradication and environmental causes; however, they are much less prominent when it comes to sensitive areas, such as democracy and government transparency.

With regard to civil society's external environment, civil society in the People's Republic of China scores well on the effectiveness of the state, as well as on the general attitude of the business sector towards civil society. On the other hand, the extent of political competition and other aspects of political and civic rights received a low score, since the Chinese government does not follow the principles of plurality and competition in its political philosophy. Instead, China currently focuses on social cohesion and building harmony within society. Also, legal constraints, particularly regarding the establishment of grassroots NGOs and umbrella bodies, remain in place and limit the growth potential for civil society.

Based on these findings, the CSI study identified three areas for recommendations for the future development of China's civil society. First, civil society's structure needs improvement, so that Chinese civil society can exert its full potential. If levels of citizen participation and organisational resources and structures within civil society were raised, civil society is likely to increase its role in society at large. More specifically, processes of diversification and networking within civil society need more attention and support. A more developed structure of networks and federations at different levels might contribute to further enhancing cooperation with government, the private sector and international partners.

Second, the environment for Chinese civil society's development, especially the existing legal provisions need to be improved: The current regulatory framework for international organisations is perceived to be overtly restrictive in terms of registration and scope of cooperation. It would also be desirable for NGOs to develop more standards and institutionalised mechanisms of self-regulation. In general, the relatively high effectiveness of the Chinese state indicates that there could be more space for the development of civil society without the danger of civil society causing disorder.

Third, the idea of civil society and its role in Chinese society needs to reach beyond the current group of well-educated urban residents. Partnerships with local government have shown some positive results in a few areas. However, exchange and dialogue with the corporate sector still needs significant improvement and corporate philanthropy has yet to take off.

Thus, currently China features a nascent civil society within a changing environment. There are various factors, such as increased social space, the emergence of an urban middle class, but also increased social concerns, that are likely to foster a growth in civil society activities in China in the years to come. It is hoped that the CSI report could contribute to this growth process by providing relevant information as well as key recommendations on how to strengthen this increasingly important group of actors in China.