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Social Organizations and Community Service Delivery in China

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New Directions in Social Policy:
Alternatives from and for the Global South

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Acronyms

SOs	Social organizations
NGOs	Non-governmental organization
PRC	People's Republic of China
Hukou	Household Registration System
Dibao	Minimum income guarantee
Wubao	Five types of guarantee
HIV/AIDs	Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS)

Acknowledgements

Abstract/Summary

In 2010, the Chinese government decided to encourage social organizations (SOs) to deliver social services. This decision received great attention from observers, both domestically and internationally, as the relationship between the Chinese government and SOs was previously characterised by political tension. In contrast, it now appeared that the government was not only offering to fund SOs but was also offering to provide in-kind support to improve the capacity of SOs so they could take responsibility for more social services. SOs grew exponentially in number due to this governmental push, and it was estimated that by the end of 2015 there would be more than 600,000 SOs in China, employing 7.35 million people, and 4,696 charitable foundations were established. This change in the state–SO relationship has had serious implications for China's social policy development. It has not only changed the bodies that provide social services but has also altered the content of these services and the decision-making processes involved. Currently, after six years of trial and error, SOs have become an important part of social policy in China. This report provides an overview of the status of SO development in China and aims to answer several questions related to the future of SOs. These questions are as follows: (i) Is the Chinese government committed to its decision to allow SOs to thrive? (ii) What added value have SOs brought to China's social service provision? (iii) Is there a promising future for SO social service provision in China?

This research includes fieldwork by the research team undertaken during 2014 and 2015 in six cities. Given the complexity of this research, which involved multiple stakeholders dealing with complicated governance issues in the process of transition, we decided to use a mixed research method—primarily qualitative analyses supported with quantitative analyses. This combined research method was particularly useful to capture the complexity and rich dynamics of the interactions between stakeholders.

This working paper is the first of three. It provides an overarching framework for the research and the social-economic background and the policy background that underpins the new trend of changing social service delivery in China. This work also provides an overview of the research methods used in the field research and the summary findings of our research in two policy sectors—old age care and community social service provision. The other two reports provide more details regarding these two policy sectors.

In the following sections, we first examine the primary social changes in China that posed major challenges to its social service delivery and the government responses to these challenges. We argue that introducing social organizations into the social service delivery system unavoidably departs from the previous narrative of the state–SO relationship by turning communities into a space that offers opportunities for each stakeholder to seek new sources of funding, new businesses and new opportunities to engage with the civil society. This is followed by a discussion of the research methods to be used in the whole research (including the three reports). Our research findings provide the state of SOs in China and how different types of SOs operate to fulfil different roles.

In 2010, the Chinese government started adopting measures to encourage social organizations (SOs) to initiate social service provision. This decision attracted some serious attention from both domestic and international observers as the relationship between the Chinese government and SOs was previously characterized by political tension. In contrast, it now appeared that the government was not only offering to fund SOs but was also offering in-kind support to improve the capacity of SOs so they could offer more social services. As a result of this governmental compulsion, SOs grew exponentially in number. It is estimated that more than 600,000 SOs were functional in China by the end of 2015, employing 7.35 million people, and 4,696 charitable foundations were established. This change in the state–SO relationship has had serious implications on China's social policy development. It has not only changed the bodies that provide social services but has also altered the content of these services and the decision-making processes involved. Currently, after six years of trial and error, SOs have become an integral part of social life in China.

This report provides an overview of the status of SO development in China and subsequently aims to answer several questions raised by many researchers related to the future of SOs. These questions are as follows: (i) Is the Chinese government serious about allowing SOs to thrive? (ii) What added value have SOs brought to China's social service provision? (iii) Is there a promising future for SO social service provision in China?

Changing the Social and Economic Environment for Social Service Provision in China

China's social service delivery system has undergone three major transitions: (i) from production-centered to human settlement–centered social service provision; (ii) from focusing on the financing of social welfare to focusing on service delivery; and (iii) from segmented and institutionalized services to a continuation of varied services that can complement each other.

Shifting from Production-Centered to Human Settlement–Centered Social Service Provision

Despite the drastic changes to the welfare system in China in the 1990s, marked by privatization of social services which used to be provided by public- or collective-sector employers, the social service system did not depart from its production-centered logic. The transition in the social welfare system from the 1980s was primarily a result of the economic changes that required a different labor protection system. Thus, the changes were a continuation of the focus on production. In contrast, a human settlement–centered system refers to a system that helps people settle in the location of their choice. It does not create barriers for people to settle and could even help residents feel secure and ultimately become part of their residential community. The shift to a human settlement–centered service in China involves two elements: (i) shifting from selective to inclusive welfare entitlement, and (ii) shifting from employment-based to community-based service provision.

From Selective to Inclusive Welfare Entitlement

The increasing inclusiveness of Chinese social policy is essentially an expansion of the offering of social citizenship from selected privileged labor groups to a wider population.

There are several factors involved in this change. The first is improved access for different social groups by implementing the following:

(i)   introducing means-tested social protection, such as a minimum living standard guarantee and unemployment benefits to unemployed people;

(ii)   establishing a social insurance contribution framework for public sector employees first, and then extend this to private sector employees (Zhang 2014);

(iii)   establishing social insurance schemes in rural areas;

(iv)   improving access to urban social benefits and services and improving labor protection and social insurance schemes for rural-urban migrants and

(v)   extending social insurance to the self-employed (Li 2013).

The second factor is the adoption of an overarching framework for finance and access to social welfare. In the past, the social protection system was highly fragmented, with different entitlements for different social groups based on their place of origin, sector of employment and place of residence. These different entitlements were decided based on different formulae and modified with different supplementary criteria. The more recent reforms have aimed at unifying the structure of each welfare segment by establishing multiple pillars for financial contributions. Thus, the entitlement of different social groups is placed under one structure, with variations resulting from different parameter settings (Li 2014).

As argued by Li (2012), despite the dominance of economic growth in public discourse in China, economic growth has not been the ultimate goal on its own—Economic growth has been fundamentally considered a useful tool to achieve social stability and political trust, which are important to ensure the legitimacy of the Communist Party of China. Therefore, due to growing awareness that livelihood ('*Minsheng*') improvement can directly contribute to social stability without requiring economic growth, welfare entitlement expanded to more social groups (such as the unemployed, rural-urban migrant population, farmers who have lost their land and impoverished farmers) despite the absence of any major political system reforms. The change towards more inclusive welfare provision in China was thus a logical result of institutional complementarity, given the desired political goals.

From Employment-Centered to Community-Centered Services

Analysts in China tend to differentiate between welfare provision during the central planning era and that during the marketization era because of China's economic transition. However, an examination of the relationship between social service provision

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