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# HOW TO GAIN TRUST AND PROMOTE SYSTEM INNOVATION: STRATEGIES OF CHINESE CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS COLLABORATING WITH THE GOVERNMENT

**Andreas FULDA, LI Yanyan and SONG Qinghua**

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International House  
University of Nottingham  
Wollaton Road  
Nottingham NG8 1BB  
United Kingdom  
Tel: +44 (0)115 846 7769  
Fax: +44 (0)115 846 7900  
Email: [CPI@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:CPI@nottingham.ac.uk)  
Website: [www.chinapolicyinstitute.org](http://www.chinapolicyinstitute.org)

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**HOW TO GAIN TRUST AND PROMOTE SYSTEM INNOVATION:  
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**ABSTRACT**

Since the turn of the millennium a second generation of Chinese civil society organisations (CSO) have started taking on issues such as rural migrant integration, social service provision, as well as community building. Organisations such as Beijing-based Shining Stone Community Action (SSCA) can be seen as the avantgarde of a second wave of humanistic, community-based CSO which are willing to help improve the strained state-society relationship in the People's Republic of China (PR China). Differing from the first wave of Chinese environmental activists these „communitarians, as social environmentalists, do not seek to bring society back to a state of nature but to advance it, toward a good society“ (Etzioni 2004). In order to advance their values and interests civil society practitioners are willing to engage with Chinese government officials. By gaining the trust of First-in-Command (FIC) cadres they manage to introduce ideas such as the principle of subsidiarity, solidarity and reciprocity. Civil society practitioners thereby initiate open-ended processes of communication, consultation and cooperation. Such processes help promote cross-sector collaboration between Chinese civil society organisations and local government agencies. These developments signify an incremental change from government control (guan zhi) to public management (guan li) and to network governance (zhi li). Drawing on the case of Shining Stone Community Action (SSCA) the three authors will illustrate the dynamics of such experiments with new forms of network governance. As a framework for the case study they look at strategies for the establishment of cooperative relations, focusing on steering mechanisms and process factors. In order to further understand the dynamics of cross-sector collaboration they further explore the social capital dimensions of the principle of reciprocity and trust. To evaluate outcomes and impacts of cross-sector collaboration, the authors discuss the ability of collaboration partners to produce tangible results and to innovate. The findings show that successful experiments with cross-sector collaboration not only depend on structural factors but also on the skills and strategies of the individuals and organisations involved.

# **How to gain trust and promote system innovation: Strategies of Chinese civil society organisations collaborating with the government**

Andreas Fulda, Li Yanyan, Song Qinghua<sup>1</sup>

## **1. Introduction**

There are many ways to familiarize oneself with the work of Chinese civil society organisations (CSO).<sup>2</sup> One is to review academic discourses on this subject matter. At the same time one should also make an effort to understand some of the existing realities in Chinese society. CSOs in the People's Republic of China (PRC) face difficulties in securing their organisational existence while operating in a complicated legal-administrative environment. In this article we will present a case study which will reveal strategies of Chinese CSOs collaborating with the government. We are convinced that such an analysis should be grounded in the observation of actual work practices of CSOs. It is not too difficult to imagine that difficulties in the relationship between Chinese CSO and the government exist. But this article will show that the amount of experiences and strategies which CSOs have gained and developed in collaborations with the government goes far beyond our expectations. Let us start with a small example. There is a broad agreement among scholars that the over-concentration of executive power among the so-called 'First in Command' (FIC) - a leading cadre of an administrative organ - is a reason for concern. FICs have a tendency to implement policies rather rigidly from the top down and are often suspected to be involved in large-scale corruption.<sup>3</sup> At the same time we have also experienced that FICs can be quite effective.

We recall a conversation which occurred during a dinner meeting of civil society

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on participant observations of the three scholars gained during more than six years of grassroots activism in China. We held three workshops in Beijing in July 2009 in order to discuss both structure and contents of the paper. The authors' names are in alphabetical order. More information about the authors can be found in the appendix.

<sup>2</sup> We prefer the term civil society organisation (CSO) over the more commonly used term non-governmental organisation (NGO) for the following reason: it reflects what these organisations stand for rather than what they are not. In order to qualify as a CSO organisations we agree with Salamon and Anheier that they should represent non-profit group interests, be anchored in values, promote solidarity and volunteerism and enjoy some personal and financial autonomy from the state and private sector. See Salamon, Lester M.; Anheier, Helmut K., *The Johns Hopkins Comparative Non Profit Sector Project, The Third World's Third Sector in Comparative Perspective*, Working Paper, Baltimore. 1997. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Ren, Jianming and Du, Zhizhou, 'Institutionalized corruption: power overconcentration of the First-in-Command in China', *Crime Crime Law and Social Change*. 2008 (49). 45-59.

practitioners from the Beijing-based CSO Shining Stone Community Action (SSCA)<sup>4</sup> and their collaborators from various government agencies in the Anshan municipality of Liaoning province. A Chinese social scientist joined the conversation and mentioned that in any kind of field research he was only willing to work with the FIC. He went on to elaborate that FICs were reliable partners who could make authoritative decisions in the cooperation between research institutions and local governments. It was interesting to observe that dinner participants by and large nodded their heads in agreement, somehow implying that in order to get things done in China, one needs to work with the FIC. This episode reveals that from the perspective of cross-sector collaboration between CSO and the government, FIC are key players that can not be ignored.<sup>5</sup> Many Chinese CSOs have a deep understanding of this strategic role of FIC. It is a key prerequisite to their effective communication with the government. We will discuss this phenomenon later on in greater detail. This small example reveals that when we overcome traditional ways of thinking and observe the practices of CSO in greater detail, new and genuinely interesting discoveries can be made.

## **2. Difficulties of grassroots NGOs collaborating with the government: How to build trust and promote system innovation?**

Let us start by defining what we mean by cross-sector collaboration. Bryson, Crosby and Stone describe the process as follows: „We (...) define cross-sector collaboration as the linking or sharing of information, resources, activities, and capabilities of organizations in two or more sectors to achieve jointly an outcome that could not be achieved by organizations in one sector separately.”<sup>6</sup> The definition is useful since it describes the key elements of collaboration, without being too specific on the exact nature of outcomes. There are already many debates on why CSOs and governments should collaborate. As direct participants in public activities CSOs can not avoid having some level of contact with government. This is all the more the case in China, where CSOs are constrained by the existing registration system.<sup>7</sup> They find it extremely

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<sup>4</sup> More information about SSCA can be obtained on the following English-language website: <http://www.communityaction.org.cn/> (download 25 August 2009). We will describe its vision and mission as well as activity fields in greater detail in our case study.

<sup>5</sup> This insight resembles the paradox Plummer and Taylor identified in their discussion of building capacity in government, whereby “*top-down* capacity building in government is essential to take forward *bottom-up* approaches.” Plummer, J. and Taylor, J.G., *Community Participation in China. Issues and Processes for Capacity Building*. London: Earthscan. 2004. 309.

<sup>6</sup> Bryson, J.M., Crosby, B.C. and Stone, M.M., ‘The Design and Implementation of Cross-Sector Collaborations: Propositions from the Literature’. *Public Administration Review*. December 2006, Special Issue. 44.

<sup>7</sup> China does not have an NGO law but three administrative regulations: the “Regulations on the Registration of Social Organisations” (1998), the “Provisional Regulations for the Registration

difficult to register and attain legal status as 'social organisations' (shetuan) or as a 'people-run non-profit unit' (minban feiqiye danwei). This legal limbo leaves them no other option than to secure their organisation's survival by registering as firms or to link their organisations to existing organisations. Under such circumstances CSOs have to gain government recognition or at least acquiescence in order to be able to act. Gao Bingzhong (2000) once pointed out that the legitimacy of organisational forms of CSOs not only relate to legitimacy by law but also legitimacy by administration -- a legitimacy based on the procedures and practices of the bureaucratic system.<sup>8</sup>

Unregistered CSO can expand their scope of activities quite considerably when they receive support by leaders from administrative organisations. In such cases civil society practitioners are granted the permission to develop activities in the fields of that particular administrative body (or the respective area of influence of the government official). Whether or not an CSO can sustain and develop as part of China's organized society also depends on its ability to mobilize and use resources provided by government agencies. Qiusha Ma describes the situation more clearly: "A prerequisite of government promotion of NGOs is its confidence in its control of NGOs"<sup>9</sup>. The Japanese scholar Okamura Mieko argues that several factors should be taken into account to gain a better understanding of the multifaceted relationship between Chinese CSO and the government. She emphasizes that since the Ninth 5-Year Plan in 1995 there has been a shift among the government's priorities from an exclusively economic to a more comprehensive social development model. With the revision of the promulgation of the "Regulations on the Registration of Social Organisations" and the "Provisional Regulations for the Registration Administration of People-Run Non-Enterprise Units" in 1998, a framework for privatization of the non-profit realm (feiyingli lingyu de minyinghua) has been created. Ever since the government shifted from mere acquiescence of NGO to a more active approach of

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Administration of People-Run Non-Enterprise Units" (1998) and the "Regulations for the Management of Foundations" (2004). Most relevant for NGOs are the Regulations on the Registration of Social Organisations. At the heart of the regulation is the 'dual management system' (*shuangchong guanli tizhi*). Non-governmental organisations need a 'registration and management agency' (*dengji guanli jiguan*) as well as an 'authorised department' (*yewu zhuguan danwei*). The Ministry of Civil Affairs on both central and local government level is the key 'registration and management agency'. Government agencies affiliated with the State Council or People's Governments on administrative levels higher than the county level as well as organisations empowered by People's Governments on administrative levels higher than the county level can act as 'authorised departments' for social organisations that fall into the realm of their industry, science or business sector. Without the support of an 'authorised department' an organisation does not qualify to register with the Ministry of Civil Affairs.

<sup>8</sup> Gao, Bingzhong, 'The problem of social organisation's legitimacy by law'. Chinese Social Science. No. 2. 2000. 100-109.

<sup>9</sup> Ma, Qiushi, Non-governmental Organizations in Contemporary China: Paving the Way to Civil Society? London and New York: Routledge. 2006. 5.

utilizing their intrinsic value. In relevant sectors such as social development or community building the government has even entered negotiations and started to procure CSO services. Okamura Mieko calls this process a relaxation of government control.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, such a relaxation of government control does not mean that Chinese CSOs have been given a *carte blanche*. In any kind of state and society CSOs will face difficulties when establishing collaborative relationships with the government. The key reason for such difficulties lie in their different forms of organisation. While both types of actors - civil society organisations as well as administrative agencies - work in the realm of public affairs, their work ethics, organisational forms, modes of operation and even types of rationality among its co-workers differ quite considerably. It does not come as a surprise that this is also the case in China. This becomes all the more visible when CSOs want to live up to one of their key functions, which is to innovate.<sup>11</sup> In order to realize system innovation, CSOs need to influence government policies. In order to achieve this ambitious goal, CSOs first need to let the government understand their values and working styles. We argue that such a joint understanding can only be realistically achieved through face-to-face collaboration between civil society practitioners and government officials in specific fields. In order to establish such collaboration and make sure that such collaboration is a lasting process CSOs need to win the trust of the government. It therefore can be argued that the key difficulty in cooperation between CSOs and government lies in the building of trust. Furthermore, it remains to be seen if cross-sector collaboration can really add value, especially when it comes to the challenging goal of system innovation.

In this article we will explore cases of cross-sector collaboration between CSOs and government. We look at what kind of strategies CSOs apply when establishing a relationship of mutual trust which in turn leads to the realization of collaboration and innovation. It is our assumption that system innovation can only be achieved by contributions from both CSOs as well as the government. We will focus primarily on CSO strategies in this interactive process. We assume that interaction is the struggle between competing actors and that it is a process of mutual influencing. Such interactive processes can be better understood by reflecting on Migdal's theory of „state-in-society“. It helps to „break down the undifferentiated concepts of the state -

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<sup>10</sup> Okamura, Mieko, 'Grassroots NGOs and the government: The process of relaxation within the field of civil society', in: Li, Yanyan (Ed.), *The Emergence of Chinese Grassroots NGO: Exploring the Possibilities of Civil Society*. 2008.

<sup>11</sup> John Hopkins Comparative Sector Project, *Field guide no. 8: Impact analysis*, Baltimore: John Hopkins Institute for Policy Studies. 1998.

and also of society - to understand how different elements in each pull in different directions, leading to unanticipated patterns of domination and transformation."<sup>12</sup> Migdal asserts that „patterns of domination are determined by key struggles spread through what I call society´s multiple arenas of domination and opposition. Officials at different levels of the state are key figures in these struggles, interacting - at times, conflicting - with an entire constellation of social forces in disparate arenas."<sup>13</sup> This theoretical framework is useful since it enables us to recognise that strategies of Chinese CSOs are being applied in places that Migdal calls 'multiple arenas of domination and opposition', each of them representing a critical juncture of party-state and civil society. And yet collaboration partners are unlikely to frame their collaboration in Migdal´s language of domination and opposition. Instead they are more likely to make good use of partnership rhetoric.<sup>14</sup>

Migdal´s „state-in-society“ approach helps to show that ex ante it is impossible to fully anticipate both the dynamic of the open-ended process and to predict the likely outcomes of experiments with cross-sector collaboration between CSOs and the government. According to Migdal, „the results of the engagement and disengagement of states and other social forces are tangible, even momentous, but outcomes rarely reflect the aims and wills imbedded in either“<sup>15</sup>. Outcomes of the interaction are likely to benefit involved actors to varying degrees, enabling them to realise some but not all of their respective goals. Migdal further points out that „in the end, those local interactions cumulatively reshape the state or the other social organization, or most commonly, both“.<sup>16</sup> Such reshaping of the government can be understood as system innovation. In the following we will analyse the process of mutual influencing from the perspective of CSOs and assess what kind of effective strategies can be applied. As a case study we have chosen Shining Stone Community Action (SSCA), a grassroots NGO established seven years ago. Since its foundation in December 2002 this Chinese CSO has been very successful in pushing for participatory urban community governance reform. This case study is informed by repeated field visits and participant observation between 2003 and 2009 as well as the by the collection and analysis of the organisation´s publications and newsletters.

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<sup>12</sup> Migdal, J.S., Kohli, A., and Shue, V., *State Power and Social Forces. Domination and Transformation in the Third World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1994. 8.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>14</sup> Yang, Tuan, 'Dui „Hezuo Huoban“ de Zhongwai Renshi Chayi'. China Development Brief. No. 33, December 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Migdal, J.S., Kohli, A., and Shue, V., *State Power and Social Forces. Domination and Transformation in the Third World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1994. 23.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

### **3. How the Beijing-based civil society organisation Shining Stone Community Action is contributing to system innovation**

We argue that a certain degree of relaxation of government control is an important prerequisite for reformed relations between CSOs and government. A case in point is a new community policy called "Community-building standardization" (*shequ guifanhua jianshe*), issued by the Beijing municipal government in 2009. The new policy is significant because it calls for a shift from management of communities (*shequ guanli*) to community governance (*shequ zhili*). In this context governance is supposed to include the realisation of (1) a greater plurality of actors, (2) more flexibility of processes and procedures, (3) leaner structures, and (4) internalization of objectives. We understand the new municipal government rhetoric to mean the following: 'a greater plurality of actors' is a call for reformed working practices of the Community Residence Committees (CRC)<sup>17</sup> with a particular focus on the participation of all relevant stakeholders including municipal government agencies, CRC, community-based organisations, community-based small businesses, enterprises, civil society organisations as well as community residents. 'More flexibility of processes and procedures' on the other hand refers to overcoming formalism and proposing the realization of stakeholder interaction. 'Leaner structures' implies the softening up of top-down command and control structures, while 'internalization of objectives' requires that community objectives are set in accordance to residents' requirements and are not merely a repetition of policy slogans. From the perspective of the Beijing-based CSO Shining Stone Community Action (SSCA) this new policy can be seen as a systemic breakthrough.

For the past six years SSCA has been promoting both action research<sup>18</sup> as well as piloting initiatives making use of the same reformist language. It is not too far-fetched to see a link between the work of SSCA and the new policy. It is a good example of a grassroots NGO contributing to system innovation. SSCA was established in December 2002 and has continuously promoted public participation in community affairs. Seven years later, in 2009, SSCA gained the trust of the Department of Civil Affairs of the Dongcheng District, a Beijing municipality, and registered as a 'people-run non-profit

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<sup>17</sup> The Community Residence Committee (CRC) is responsible for 1.000-3.000 community households. It's legal status is defined as a 'resident's self-government organisation'. Due to historical reasons 90% of its work objectives are set up by the sub-district committees (*jjedaobanshichu*).

<sup>18</sup> For more information about action research see McKernan, James, Curriculum Action Research. A Handbook of Methods and Resources for the Reflective Practitioner, Oxon: Routledge. 96.

unit'. The Department of Civil Affairs acted as SSCA's 'authorised department', thereby granting SSCA the legal status of a government-recognized Chinese civil society organisation. Its organisational mission is to "assist China's urban communities develop capacities and build institutions to allow for effective participation in community affairs, to promote sustainable participatory governance reforms, and to facilitate harmonious community development".<sup>19</sup>

SSCA works in the following activity fields. First of all, it provides information, consultancy and training relating to urban community participation. Secondly, it provides capacity building for social innovation work and collects and publishes related documents. Third, SSCA conducts action research on innovative pilot initiatives in Chinese urban community participation reform. Fourth, SSCA acts as a platform for information exchange, communication, cooperation and interaction between government, enterprises, academicians, civil society organisations as well as community residents. Fifth, SSCA helps to nurture and develop community-based organisations. From these activity fields we can see that SSCA's work is inseparable from the issue of community administration. In other words, their work makes it an absolute necessity to establish working relationships with local governments. SSCA therefore can be seen as an ideal case study for our proposed research.

**Landmarks of the organisational development of Shining Stone Community Action (2003-2009)**

Year	No. of co-workers	Main projects	Results	Founding resources
2003	2	Consulted scholars and government officials; participated in trainings; organized trainings on "Principles and practices of community participation"	Beginning of trainings for government officials; publication of "Community Participation Action Newsletter"; conduct of 6 trainings with 300 participants	Ford Foundation, Global Greengrants Fund (GGF)

<sup>19</sup> Available from the Internet: <http://www.communityaction.org.cn/index.aspx>

2004	3	Study tours to the US and Indonesia; conduct of "Sustainable Community Leadership" training; joint conduct of "Principles and practices of community participation" training with the Ministry of Civil Affairs for MoCA cadres from all over China	Conduct of "1st Chinese Urban Community Participatory Governance Conference"; conduct of 8 trainings with 250 participants	Ford Foundation, Wildflowers Institute, Global Greengrants Fund (GGF)
2005	5	Establishment of a pilot site at Haishu district, Ningbo municipality; conduct of trainings on "Principles and practices of community participation"; participation in MoCA field study on status of Chinese urban communities	Successful establishment of first pilot site in Ningbo; first ever government procurement of SSCA's services; conduct of 10 trainings with 500 participants	Ford Foundation, Haishu district of Ningbo municipality, Wildflowers Institute, Global Greengrants Fund (GGF)
2006	6	Establishment of a pilot site at Qingyuan district, Beijing municipality; conduct of first "Future Search Conference"; facilitated the participation of social workers from Ningbo municipality at a training in the United States	Successful beginning of pilot site work in Beijing; conduct of first "Future Search Conference" entirely run by Chinese CSOs; conduct of 28 trainings with 1,000 participants	Ford Foundation, Wildflowers Institute, Global Greengrants Fund (GGF), American Bar Association
2007	9	Pilot site work in Daxing district, Beijing municipality, as well as in Anshan municipality; conduct of trainings	Conduct of 36 trainings with 1,600 participants	Ford Foundation, Daxing district of Beijing municipality, Wildflowers Institute, Global Greengrants Fund (GGF), American Bar Association,

2008	13	Pilot site work in Daxing district as well as Doncheng district, both Beijing municipality as well as Anshan municipality; conduct of Open Space meetings; conduct of Sub-district office conference on participatory governance	Organisation of 42 trainings and community dialogues involving a total number of 3,500 participants	Ford Foundation, Daxing district of Beijing municipality, Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Global Greengrants Fund (GGF)
08/ 2009	12	Pilot site work in Daxing district, Beijing municipality and Anshan municipality; Conference on Anshan pilot site experience; Conference on Daxing pilot site experience; conduct of community mediation in Dongcheng district, Beijing municipality	Conduct of 20 conferences and community dialogues involving 1,800 participants; conduct of 16 trainings involving 640 participants	Ford Foundation, Daxing district of Beijing municipality, Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Global Greengrants Fund (GGF)

#### **4. Framework for the case study**

In the following we will outline the framework for the case study analysis on cross-sector collaboration between CSOs and the government. It can help to illuminate how civil society practitioners are contributing to local governance system innovation by partnering with the government. We suggest that the case study should be designed in a way that satisfies both the need for rigour among academics and helps provide insights for civil society practitioners looking for strategic advice. According to Thomson and Perry, actors in cross-sector collaboration have to continuously monitor and evaluate three key processes: 1) the process of informal communication between individuals as well as formal negotiations between organisations, 2) the process of building up commitment through formal and mental contracts, thereby reducing the possibility of free-riding among partners, and 3) the process of implementation, where co-operation partners reveal whether or not they are living up to their commitments.

Once collaborators violate the principle of reciprocity this can lead to a revision of commitments among partners and a renegotiation over rights and duties.<sup>20</sup> Our framework for the case study is based on Thomson and Perry's understanding of the three key processes. It can help us gain a better understanding of the dynamics of cross-sector collaboration in China. Our framework can be summarized as follows:

(1) We will start with an analysis of the prerequisites for collaboration as well as strategies in the establishment of collaboration mechanisms, with a particular focus on the two structural factors steering mechanisms and network management as well as process factors.

(2) In a second step we will focus on CSO strategies applied during the collaboration process, with a particular focus on factors pertaining to social capital, e.g. the establishment of trust and reciprocity.

(3) In a third step we look at the effects of cross-sector collaboration and analyse CSO strategies for system innovation.

This approach will help generate a cognitive map of the relevant elements that need to be considered when analysing experiments with cross-sector collaboration. Each step will be discussed by drawing on first-hand empirical data and linking them with insights gained from the literature on cross-sector collaboration and network governance.

## **5. Emerging CSO strategies**

### **5.1 From 'CSO procuring government services' to 'government procuring CSO services': Structural and process factors**

In July 2009 the three authors conducted a capacity-building workshop in the Beijing office of Shining Stone Community Action (SSCA). Together with co-workers from various Beijing-based environmental and social development CSOs we discussed how CSOs could establish collaborative relationships with the government. When asked about who the driving forces were and from where these forces came from in experiments of such cross-sector collaboration, there was a consensus among training participants that such experiments were mostly initiated by the CSOs themselves.

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<sup>20</sup> Thomson, A.M. and Perry, J.L., 'Collaboration Processes: Inside the Black Box'. Public Administration Review. December 2006, Special Issue. 24.

During the training course three initial phases in the collaboration between CSOs and government were identified. In a first phase it was mainly the CSOs who would make good use of their own resources such as project funding and human resources to persuade the government to collaborate. In this first phase the government would closely monitor their working style. After a while government officials would often realize that they may actually gain from collaborating with CSOs. In a second phase the government would actively seek CSO collaboration in areas of their interest, while the government would still expect the CSO to provide their organisational resources. In a third phase the government would start to procure CSO services in areas where there is enough overlap of common interests and joint policy objectives.

This process can be seen as a transition from 'CSO procuring government services' to 'government procuring CSO services'. Whether or not there is a chance for cross-sector collaboration between grassroots CSO and the government therefore mainly depends whether or not in the first phase CSOs are capable of making good use of opportunities to procure government services. Such approaches to collaboration are often not the result of a deliberate strategy by civil society practitioners but rather a practical prerequisite to be able to do anything at all. And yet we recognize that such practices can be described as an important CSO strategy in dealing with the government. We will start our case study analysis by focusing on both structural factors and process factors. Structural factors mostly relate to steering mechanisms as well as network management, while process factors deal with the capacity of collaboration partners to recognize that collaboration is a process, and that community work is also a process.

## **5.2 Steering mechanisms: Applying the 'First-in-Command strategy'**

In the introduction we mentioned the importance of the 'First-in-Command strategy'. It is also key to a better understanding of steering mechanisms. FIC need to be involved if CSOs want to engage in cross-sector collaboration with the government.<sup>21</sup> Co-workers of Shining Stone learned about this only after various attempts to establish a working relationship with the government. Whilst SSCA has been using office space provided by the Hepingli sub-district office in Beijing municipality until now they have not established a joint project for participatory community governance. The reason is that while repeated efforts were made to contact and communicate with the Hepingli

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<sup>21</sup> We do not believe that the position of the FIC in the hierarchy matters most but the rather the fact that the FIC can make authoritative decisions in his or her areas of responsibility.

sub-district office's FIC, the person in charge often changed, so they had to start their communications from anew.

SSCA had a similar experience in the Haishu district of Ningbo municipality. They had successfully initiated a pilot site in Ningbo in 2005. But when the FIC in charge left, SSCA had no choice but to stop their work as well, since the new FIC had different priorities from the previous FIC. These are two examples which underline the key role that FIC play. When SSCA was approached by the Daxing sub-district office of the Beijing municipality for advice about about the use of the sub-district's community service center, SSCA immediately requested to discuss this issue with the FIC alone. The reason was that if SSCA had explained their ideas and plans to government officials of a lower rank, these officials would still have to report to and gain the support of their superiors. Without the support of their superiors, however, any kind of collaboration would not be possible.

A basic NGO strategy therefore is to directly discuss matters with the FIC. SSCA's collaboration with the Daxing sub-district office helps to further illustrate this point. At the beginning the local government's understanding of the community service center had been a fairly traditional one, which meant that they were willing to provide the space for the community center rather than services to community residents. SSCA emphasized that the key function of a community service center was to provide services rather than space for activities. Rather than targeting all the community residents, the sub-district office should also focus on vulnerable groups. And instead of discussing how to make use of the community center's space they started discussing what kind of service projects should be provided. A further innovation was SSCA's requirement that members of vulnerable groups themselves should do the planning and implementation of such service projects rather than rely on the help of CRC co-workers. These differences in perspective indicate that without repeated communication and consultation it would have been impossible for both partners to develop a mutual understanding of what has to be done. This is another reason for civil society organisations to engage in direct communication.

### **5.3 Network management: Setting up of specialized project groups**

Findings from the literature on network governance suggest that civil society organizations and local government agencies are more likely to to engage in

collaboration in areas where they have a common problem to solve.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, both sides need to be willing to accept the organisational interests of their counterparts as well as acknowledge their interdependence in order to be able to engage in collaboration.<sup>23</sup> In China such collaboration requires the support of the FIC. Participants need to be aware that once they start to collaborate they enter a network-based form of cooperation which significantly differs from the top-down working style of local Chinese governments. Peter Knöpfel, Ingrid Kissling-Näf and Daniel Marek describe such networks as a kind of proto-organisation, which is less formalized in comparison to classic organisations and which uses the modus of negotiation in order to coordinate its activities.<sup>24</sup> According to Bryson, Crosby and Stone these functions of networks can be realised in varying forms: 1) by self-government in regular meetings, 2) a formal coordinating organisation in the network, and 3) an administrative organisation, which is supporting the network in technical matters.<sup>25</sup> The search for a suitable administrative structure of the evolving network is likely to be guided by the question of whether all participating actors can agree to the chosen structure.

When cooperating with the Daxing sub-district office, SSCA chose to establish a number of different project groups at different levels, which included a 'leading small group', a 'coordinating small group', and various 'implementing small groups'. The relationship between the three groups can be described as the 'leading small group' being on top of the vertical structure, while the internal structure of each small group is entirely horizontal and on equal footing. This way the top-down approach of the Chinese bureaucracy is being married with the deliberative horizontal mechanisms required for effective cross-sector collaboration. The 'leading small group' included the party secretary and head of the Daxing sub-district office, the head of the Community Service Center, as well as the head of SSCA. They jointly discussed the progress of the project cooperation and found solutions to problems once they occurred. The 'coordinating small group' on the other hand included co-workers from all the three parties involved, the Community Service Center, the Community Residence Committee (CRC) as well as Shining Stone Community Action (SSCA). Their responsibility was to facilitate the day-to-day operations of the project cooperation. Finally, the

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<sup>22</sup> Knoepfel, P., Kissling-Näf, I. and Marek, D., *Lernen in öffentlichen Politiken*. Helbing & Lichtenhahn Verlag AG. Basel. 1997. 24-25.

<sup>23</sup> Bryson J.M., Crosby, B.C. and Stone, M.M., 'The Design and Implementation of Cross-Sector Collaborations: Propositions from the Literature'. *Public Administration Review*. December 2006, Special Issue. 46.

<sup>24</sup> Knoepfel, P., Kissling-Näf, I. and Marek, D., *Lernen in öffentlichen Politiken*. Helbing & Lichtenhahn Verlag AG. Basel. 1997. 23-24.

<sup>25</sup> Bryson J.M., Crosby, B.C. and Stone, M.M., 'The Design and Implementation of Cross-Sector Collaborations: Propositions from the Literature'. *Public Administration Review*. December 2006, Special Issue. 49.

'implementing small groups' were established and staffed by community residents themselves. The community service projects therefore were carried out by residents. In order to facilitate this process of self-organisation SSCA analysed their target groups and identified residents with leadership skills. In a second step they encouraged these community leaders to help mobilise and organise the relevant constituency. These 'implementing small groups' took on the form of community-based organisations (CBO). As citizen-led voluntary organisations they now either take care of the elderly, such as the 'Elderly Support Group', or they help provide inexpensive clothing for members of the rural migrant community, such as the 'Second hand shop for new residents'.

The establishment of such specialized small groups in network management is something that the government happily accepts and can be seen as another effective CSO strategy. At the same time collaboration partners at all levels need to contemplate how to technically administer their network. Not all issues can be resolved with the help of small groups. Van Waarden distinguishes between the functions of providing information, consultation and the exchange of information, negotiation, and coordination and cooperation in planning and implementing projects.<sup>26</sup> From a legal-administrative point of view CSO are likely to be in a position of weakness, given that most civil society organizations are still registered as firms and therefore lack formal recognition by the government. Furthermore they will need to agree on certain rules of the game, e.g. how to exchange information, how to engage in strategic planning,<sup>27</sup> how to divide labor, and how to implement specific programs and activities. As we learned from the insights of Bryson, Crosby and Stone the importance of repeated meetings of collaboration partners can not be underestimated. It allows them to develop network-specific values, rules and trust. Knöpfel, Kissling-Näf, and Marek refer to this as a 'local theory' which includes the shared assumptions about systemic interdependency.<sup>28</sup> This means that in order to develop mutual trust both sides need to have frequent meetings, establish small groups and agree on rules for their cooperation.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 47.

<sup>27</sup> Bryson, J.M., 'Why Strategic Planning in Public and Nonprofit Organizations is More Important Than Ever', in: J. Steven Ott und E.W. Russell (Eds.), *Introduction to Public Administration. A Book of Readings*. Beijing: Peking University Press. 2006. 314-323.

<sup>28</sup> Knoepfel, P., Kissling-Näf, I. and Marek, D., *Lernen in öffentlichen Politiken*. Basel: Helbing & Lichtenhahn Verlag AG. 1997. 41.

#### **5.4 Process thinking: A driving force for cross-sector collaboration**

And yet if Chinese CSO want to establish collaboration with government agencies, it is not enough to simply organise frequent meetings, establish small groups and agree on rules for collaboration. A key challenge is to overcome the tendency among local governments to settle for mere formalism. Civil society practitioners need to let government officials understand that results of the collaboration will not be realised overnight, that such collaboration should be seen as a long-term process that requires efforts and commitment on both sides. Also, the government needs to be aware that collaborating with CSOs will require them to invest time. Enlightening the government about the importance of processes is another key prerequisite for the establishment of collaborative relationships. If the abovementioned structural factors can be described as 'organisational prerequisites', the latter process factors can be called 'conceptual prerequisites'. Neither discussions about collaboration nor implementation of joint initiatives are one-off events but should rather be envisaged as cyclical processes. Often the government is promoting community building by organising large-scale community activities rather than implementing specific policies. In the activity fields of SSCA such government formalism is a frequent occurrence. Communities are awarded formal plaques and banners for being a 'civil community' (wenming shequ) after carrying out a number of related activities.

SSCA recently cooperated with the Jianguomen sub-district office of the Beijing municipality on issues relating to the well-being of the community residents. They let local government officials understand that it is not enough to simply put up plaques and to assume that such one-off activities could actually solve any problem. The Jianguomen sub-strict office had planned to build a 2,700-square-meter community service center which was supposed to be in use by October 2009. Local officials had approached SSCA because they realized that in the past they had spent a lot of money without achieving much results. So they were interested in establishing a service center that would truly meet the needs of the community residents. SSCA helped them realize this objective by organising an Open Space Forum on the topic "I am willing to get involved in our community service center".<sup>29</sup> Working through the Community Residence Committees (CRC) an invitation to 200 community residents was posted online. With the help of the two-day community dialogue, residents were able to provide feedback on plans for the use of the community center's space and give suggestions on how the center should be managed.

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<sup>29</sup> For more information about the Open Space methodology see Owen, Harrison, Open Space Technology. A User's Guide. Third Edition. San Francisco: Berret-Koehler Publishers, Inc.. 2008.

Had the government gone about this job by simply holding one of its traditional meetings it would have been impossible to discuss how to deal with the many suggestions raised by the participating residents. It would have resulted in another instance of mere formalism, where the work stops after the conduct of a one-off activity. This would have meant that the collaboration between the CSO and the government would have also come to an end. So in order to prevent this from happening, SSCA prodded the sub-district to hold another meeting a month later in order to update the community residents on the project details, to showcase the revised plans for the renovation of the community center and to explain what kind of resident suggestions the sub-district office had taken on board and which it had not and for what reasons. By now the renovation work on the community center would already have started, with plans for the next meeting taking shape. They would continue to discuss what kind of projects suggested by the residents could be accommodated by the service center and which role the residents should play in the process of project implementation. SSCA would continue to provide trainings on project design and management. SSCA's experience shows that CSOs need to maintain this kind of work ethic to press for continuous change and that they should not be satisfied by one-off activities.

## **6. From reciprocity to trust: social capital factors**

### **6.1 The principle of reciprocity: CSO strategies of 'helping the government to achieve' and 'serving as a bridge between the sectors and between different levels of hierarchy'**

So far we have discussed both structural and procedural factors which are key to establishing collaborative relationships between CSOs and the government. In the following we will turn our attention to social capital factors which are key to sustaining such collaborations, in particular the principle of reciprocity and the importance of gaining trust. Bryson, Crosby and Stone argue that power imbalances in cross-sector collaboration can make it hard for cooperation partners to agree on common goals.<sup>30</sup> In order to generate mutual understanding and trust among unequal partners, each side has to be able to appreciate the interests and values of their counterparts.<sup>31</sup> Such

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<sup>30</sup> Bryson J.M., Crosby, B.C. and Stone, M.M. 2006, 'The Design and Implementation of Cross-Sector Collaborations: Propositions from the Literature'. Public Administration Review. December 2006. Special Issue. 50.

<sup>31</sup> For more information about the role of tacit knowledge see Robert Agranoff, 'Inside Collaborative Networks: Ten Lessons for Public Managers'. Public Administration Review. December 2006. Special Issue. 60.

capacity for reflection is likely to help promote more equal forms of collaboration. If Chinese CSOs want to obtain the trust of government agencies it is important for them to understand their respective values and interests. If civil society practitioners want government officials to accept their own values and take over responsibility for the collaborative effort they first need to understand the interests of the government. After all a key prerequisite for successful collaboration is that both sides can forge a consensus and find common objectives. The logic is that in order to gain the respect of others, one needs to respect the other first; if one wants to enter a reciprocal relationship one party needs to make the first step. Or in the words of Saul Alinsky, Chinese civil society practitioners need to be politically schizoid:<sup>32</sup> capable of understanding the individual needs of the FIC and their party-state organisations and still be able to maintain their own idea or vision of what constitutes a good Chinese society or community.

Upholding the value of reciprocity while working within the confines of the existing legal-administrative system requires Chinese civil society practitioners to be extremely flexible. As practices of New Public Management (NPM) have found their way into the party-state administration Chinese civil society practitioners often face the challenge that local administrators have adopted the logic of „target-oriented management“<sup>33</sup> and are only willing to let Chinese civil society organisations contribute to goals which have been unilaterally set up by administrative actors. Such combinations of goals and means severely restrict the principle of reciprocity by forcing Chinese civil society organisations to adopt the agendas of local government agencies. This is problematic since „in the constructivist view, the problems which governments seek to resolve are not just considered to have an 'objective' base in the economy or the material structure of society, but are also constructed in the realm of public and private discourse (...) A problem is the result of negotiations among groups with competing definitions.“<sup>34</sup> If grassroots NGOs can not overcome the challenge of possibly being used to attain predetermined goals they have no opportunity to define or redefine problems and will have problems playing out their own strengths.

SSCA has dealt with both problems by helping the government achieve its goals and by serving as a bridge between the sectors and between different levels of hierarchy. Helping the government achieve its goals means that the work of government officials

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<sup>32</sup> Alinsky, Saul, *Rules for Radicals. A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals*, 1971. New York. Vintage Books. 78.

<sup>33</sup> Lane, Jan-Erik, *Public Administration and Public Management. The principal-agent perspective*. London and New York: Routledge. 2005. 236.

<sup>34</sup> Fischer, Frank, *Reframing Public Policy. Discursive Politics and Deliberative Practices*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2003. 61.

is considered successful if it is recognized as valuable by their superiors. In order to gain the appreciation of their superiors government agencies need proof (zhengji) that the work in their respective activity fields has been both innovative and effective and that they have not simply repeated policy slogans. In such instances CSO actually have room to maneuver by emphasizing the need for 'win-win' solutions. In the process of designing and implementing their collaboration with the government they can deliberately include project components that will highlight the contributions of individuals within the participating government agencies as well as their service counterparts.

We would like to illustrate this strategic approach with another example from SSCA's work in the Anshan municipality of Liaoning province. In an urban community with a high proportion of elderly people SSCA and local government agencies jointly established a voluntary citizen association called the "Community Repair Service Group". Due to a lack of public relations work the group initially did not receive enough attention from community residents. Yet when the government issued a local policy requiring the replacement of old heaters in community buildings a significant change occurred. The reason was that in order to install heaters on walls, people need to drill holes. Private sector enterprises in Anshan provide such services for 12 RMB per hole, which is quite a heavy burden for low-income households. So the "Community Repair Service Group" made good use of this opportunity and offered to help to implement this municipal policy. For low-income households they provided their services for free, while charging all other community residents 2 RMB per drilled hole. The residents responded very well to this service. This immediately increased the overall standing and respect for the group within the community, thereby enhancing the self-respect and confidence of its group members. At the same time, the success of the "Community Repair Service Group" was also a recognition of the municipal government's policy. When SSCA organised a project evaluation meeting together with local government agencies and community residents this positive example was widely seen by the political leadership as a good example of successful public participation in community management. It is indicative how Chinese CSO can help the government achieve its objectives by insisting on a 'win-win' model.

As Chinese CSO are located outside the administrative system they can also serve as a bridge between various government sectors and establish cooperative relationships with agencies at different levels of the government's hierarchy. Civil society practitioners often experience being able to talk with everyone on an equal footing. Their experience is markedly different from officials within the government system who have

to respect the hierarchy at all times. It thus frequently happens that government officials ask civil society practitioners to invite leaders from other government departments as well as famous scholars to join their conferences in order for the latter two participant groups to recognize their work achievements. From the perspective of the local government, such opportunities to showcase their achievements are very rare. In their engagement with the local party state, Chinese civil society organisations are well advised to set their own standards for how much they are willing to compromise. This is of key importance since even in network governance, their collaboration partners with management functions are still mostly integrated within the top-down hierarchy of their affiliated organisation.<sup>35</sup> Civil society practitioners have to ponder the question of how much they are willing to integrate with a network which is likely to be dominated by bureaucratic actors. On the one hand such an integration allows them access to the long sought-after political process, and yet according to Felix Kolb this can also be regarded as a strategic attempt of political elites to integrate and neutralize the critical potential of a movement.<sup>36</sup> Both collaboration partners need to reflect on two fairly different planning logics: 1) the ideal of a rational planning process based on top-down goal-setting and the identification of means and measures of achieving them; and 2) a far more politically rational and interactive process of planning which aims to negotiate goal-means combinations in public policy making.<sup>37</sup>

## **6.2 The importance of gaining trust: CSO strategies of 'showcasing the results of cross-sector collaboration' and 'getting the support of academia and media'**

Local government agencies have the power to allocate financial resources according to priorities of the CCP and most of the time they do not support Chinese CSO financially. And yet (1) law, and (2) money are only two of the six possible resources in cross-sector collaboration, which also include (3) consensus, (4) legitimation, (5) information and (6) time. Knöpfel, Kissling-Näf, and Marek argue that civil society organizations can mobilize the remaining four resources to advance their values and interests vis-à-vis bureaucratic actors. For example civil society practitioners can exchange access to power against the non-mobilization of popular resistance. Also in terms of the legitimization of party-state interventions they can lend the Chinese communist party

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<sup>35</sup> Agranoff, Robert, 'Inside Collaborative Networks: Ten Lessons for Public Managers', Public Administration Review. December 2006. Special Issue. 57.

<sup>36</sup> Kolb, Felix, 'Soziale Bewegungen und politischer Wandel', Studie im Auftrag des Deutschen Naturschutzring. Available online: [www.bewegungsstiftung.de](http://www.bewegungsstiftung.de) (download 1 May 2005). 48.

<sup>37</sup> Etzioni, Amitai, 'Mixed Scanning: A "Third" Approach to Decision Making', 1967, in: Jay M. Shafritz, J.M., Layne, K.S., and Borick, C.P., Classics of Public Policy. Beijing: Pearson Education Asia Limited and Peking University Press. 2006. 42-46.

credibility simply by making sure that new actors such as citizens are being granted the right to participate and that more independent community-based organizations come into being.<sup>38</sup> Last but not least, by enrolling social scientists sympathetic to their cause Chinese CSO can forge alliances with the world of academia, which enhances their own credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of local power-holders.<sup>39</sup> The working practices of Shining Stone Community Action reveal that SSCA has utilized two types of CSO strategies to obtain the trust of the government which can be summarized as 'showcasing the results of cross-sector collaboration' and 'getting the support of academia and media'.

In July 2008, SSCA volunteered to contribute to community reconstruction in the Mianzhu municipality after the May 12 earthquake hit Sichuan province. Its offer to help was rejected by the Mianzhu municipal government. The local government was wary of letting CSOs deal directly with local residents. SSCA was only allowed to work in the disaster-stricken communities through government agencies. As SSCA co-workers realized that this would mean that they could not establish a genuine partnership with the communities in question they had no choice but to give up and return to Beijing. Only three months later the Mianzhu municipal government started to encounter serious difficulties in implementing central government policies which dealt with the reconstruction of houses. They also faced increasing difficulties in managing rising neighborhood conflicts. In order to solve these problems they held a conference to which they also invited social scientists. As one outcome of the conference they listened to scholars sympathetic to the cause of civil society building and finally allowed SSCA to enter their communities to do their work. In October 2008 SSCA re-established contact with the Mianzhu municipal government and started to work in its communities after the beginning of the Spring Festival in 2009. Upon arrival it only took them a couple of hours to solve a pressing problem which had to do with the safety of remaining building structures. Some residents had been unwilling to make the necessary investments to stabilize buildings that had been structurally weakened during the earthquake. The government felt unable to solve these problems and asked SSCA to mediate. SSCA was given the mandate to conduct a participatory community dialogue together with community residents. After only a couple of hours they managed to reach a mutually agreeable consensus among participating community residents. This event caught the attention of the local media and was also reported on the website of the Mianzhu government. This development underlines

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<sup>38</sup> Knoepfel, P., Kissling-Näf, I. and Marek, D., *Lernen in öffentlichen Politiken*. Basel: Helbing & Lichtenhahn Verlag AG. 1997. 48.

<sup>39</sup> Leach, M. and Scoones, I., 'Mobilising Citizens: Social Movements and the Politics of Knowledge'. IDS Working Paper 276. 2007. 16-20.

SSCA's philosophy of achieving change through action and influencing the government by solving problems in partnership with government officials.

The Mianzhu example shows that CSOs require the support of experts and scholars as well as the attention of the media in order to gain the deeper trust of the government. Since the central government has made "Scientific Development" a new mantra for a more balanced development model which takes economic, political and social factors into account, CSOs can capitalize on contacts with scholars who can lend their scientific credentials to further their specific cause. SSCA has always tried to include academics in their work. Scholars are regularly invited to their trainings, project review meetings as well as conferences to provide feedback to all stakeholders involved. Since the topic of participatory urban community governance is a new and attractive research topic, many social and political scientists have been willing to support SSCA through their research. It is another example of how the interactive nature of SSCA's work has helped to strengthen its organisational role. It has also had transformative effects on some of the participating scholars who increasingly see the value of becoming more grounded in community work and are planning to conduct more action research in the future. Such developments underline that CSOs can make a difference. These insights help the government adopt a more pragmatic approach towards them.

According to Larry Diamond such pragmatism among all stakeholders is of crucial importance to the development of a political culture: „Pragmatism – one of the qualities Tocqueville first identified as a distinctive property of American democracy – facilitates bargaining and compromise by rendering goals negotiable and opinions and beliefs open to engagement and new information. Such intellectual openness promotes tolerance by accepting “the idea that no one has a monopoly on absolute truth and that there can be no single, correct answer to public policy issues” (Diamond quote Lucien Pye, “The Crisis of Authoritarianism”, p.15). Thus pragmatism restrains the role of ideology in politics, and hence the danger of conflict polarization. Moreover, because the goals and beliefs of the pragmatist are implicit and so adaptable to circumstances, they are less likely to be totally abandoned under challenge or stress. From this perspective, the implicit character of democratic commitments is also their strength, rendering them sacred and beyond question and calculation. Because pragmatism generates flexible goals, it is consistent with a commitment to democratic procedural norms that take precedence over substantive policy objectives. This overriding

commitment to democratic proceduralism is a critical political cultural condition for democracy.”<sup>40</sup>

### **6.3 The pursuit of system innovation: CSO strategies of 'using government rhetoric to change government concepts' and 'working with the government to change government thinking'**

So far the discussion has mainly focused on the processes of cross-sector collaboration itself. But what about the outcomes? It's been argued that ex ante it is impossible for any participant to fully anticipate both the dynamics of the open-ended process and to predict the likely outcomes of experiments with cross-sector collaboration. This makes it difficult to assess both their outcomes and impacts. Alternatively we can turn to the question how networks take over responsibility. According to Bryson, Crosby and Stone networks become responsible a) by coming into being, b) by serving the organisational interests and values of collaboration partners, and c) by generating added value for the public good.<sup>41</sup> By creating transparency in their shared goals and means, both sides can deflect possible criticism. Due to the vastly differing value orientations of civil society practitioners and party-state representatives, it is fairly unlikely that both sides will be able to agree to pursue systemic or paradigmatic change objectives. And still the added value of cross sector collaboration may lie in the ability of civil society practitioners and FICs to agree to introduce new instruments and methods in public policy making and policy implementation. As such cross sector collaboration can become a laboratory for new forms of governance. But what kind of innovations can result from cross-sector collaboration?

In the case of SSCA the innovation lies in the organisation's advocacy of participatory community governance. Their approach differs quite considerably from traditional top-down approaches to community management. SSCA calls for the inclusion of all relevant stakeholders in the discussion about the internal needs of the community, the kind of community services that should be provided, by whom and how and how the quality of such services should be assessed. They are convinced that many problems can only be solved through means of self-government at the community level. This approach stands in great contrast to the conventional approach taken by many municipal governments which simply promote policy slogans and require community

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<sup>40</sup> Diamond, L. (Ed.), *Political Culture and Democracy in Developing Countries*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc. 1994. 10-11.

<sup>41</sup> Bryson J.M., Crosby, B.C. and Stone, M.M., 'The Design and Implementation of Cross-Sector Collaborations: Propositions from the Literature'. *Public Administration Review*. December 2006. Special Issue. 51.

residents to follow the newest policy line. SSCA is convinced that community self-government can not be achieved by the municipal government simply organising a couple of activities at the community level, nominating a few outstanding residents and awarding them some prizes. As we have outlined in the first part of this article the innovative concept of community participation has already been included in the official work of the "Beijing Municipal Societal Construction Working Committee". There are also first signs of new efforts to put this concept into practice. These are promising indicators that new ideas are already having an effect in terms of system innovation. The challenge in the future will be to make sure that new systems do not remain a mere formality but that they live up to their promises. SSCA advocates that system innovation can be enhanced by following the two CSO strategies of 'using government rhetoric to change government concepts' and 'working with the government to change government thinking'.

Co-workers of SSCA are convinced that many of the government's policies should be pursued, for example the provision of community services, community building, development of grassroots democracy, and community self-government. Many government policies such as building a harmonious society and taking care of the welfare of people are pointing in the right direction. At the same time they are aware that because of long-held attitudes within the Chinese administration there exists a large gap between policy objectives and policy implementation and that many local government agencies do not know effective means to roll out policies at the community level. SSCA derives much of its legitimacy by making good use of their practical skills and coming up with constructive proposals, thereby gradually helping the government to realize their policy objectives. 'Using government rhetoric to change government concepts' is not a contradiction as long as SSCA feels that there is not too much of a difference between government rhetoric and its own actions. Furthermore they see the use of government rhetoric as another way of reducing suspicion among government officials, allowing them to believe that CSO are not planning to obstruct government policies but that in fact they are willing to work in partnership with the government. The scholar Qiushi Ma summarizes this approach as follows: "Against such a broad context, Chinese NGOs do not consider themselves as the vanguard of society battling state intrusion or as an independent sector with a distinct function. Rather, the great majority of Chinese NGOs see their roles as complementing and assisting the state"<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>42</sup> Ma, Qiushi, *Non-governmental Organizations in Contemporary China: Paving the Way to Civil Society?* London and New York: Routledge. 2006. 9.

One could argue that this also applies to the work of SSCA. But while SSCA helps the government realize its policy objectives by coming up with innovative ideas on suitable policy tools it does not fully become an instrument of the government. In fact this strategic approach enables SSCA to do the things they like to do. Also, their working style is having an ever increasing influence on its collaboration partners. A final example could be their mediation work for the Nanluogu Xiang sub-district office of the Beijing municipality. Conflicts between business owners and residents could be managed through a mediation meeting, whilst new collaborative projects were initiated. An outcome of the meeting was establishing a joint "Business-Resident Association" which would be in charge of helping shop owners and community residents jointly organise a yearly cultural festival. A shop would be set up in which community residents will be able to sell their second-hand goods. When the sub-district's First-in-Command (FIC) experienced such positive outcomes of the conflict mediation he promised to expand the areas of future collaboration with SSCA. In a similar vein the Health Department of Dongcheng district, Beijing municipality, was very satisfied with the outcomes of a conference on "Community Health Home". Their leaders are now willing to procure SSCA's services and let them train their co-workers in moderating techniques for participatory and open-ended community dialogues. This has led to the realization among staff of SSCA that cross-sector collaboration does not end when the government procures its services but rather that it is the beginning of a deeper process of mutual learning and mutual transformation.

## **7. Conclusion**

Organisations such as Beijing-based Shining Stone Community Action (SSCA) can be seen as the avant garde of a second wave of humanistic, community-based civil society organisations which are willing to help improve the strained state-society relationship in the People's Republic of China (PR China). Differing from the first wave of Chinese environmental activists these „communitarians, as social environmentalists, do not seek to bring society back to a state of nature but to advance it, toward a good society".<sup>43</sup> For the past six years co-workers from Shining Stone Community Action (SSCA) have continuously prodded Chinese local government officials to open up their planning, decision-making and implementation processes to the public and lobbied them to perceive citizens as partners for sustainable development. SSCA thereby promotes good government, a necessary supporting factor in China's incremental

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<sup>43</sup> Etzioni, A., Volmer, A. and Rothschild, E. (Eds), *The Communitarian Reader. Beyond the Essentials*. Landham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2004. 1.

democratization process as understood by the Chinese scholar Yu Keping.<sup>44</sup> Or in the words of John Dewey: "When a state is a good state, when the officers of the public genuinely serve the public interests, this reflex effect is of great importance. It renders the desirable associations solidier and more coherent; indirectly it clarifies their aims and purges their activities. (...) . In performing these services, it gives the individual members of valued associations greater liberty and security: It relieves them of hampering conditions which if they had to cope with personally would absorb their energies in mere negative struggle against evils. (...) . A measure of the goodness of a state is the degree in which it relieves individuals from the waste of negative struggle and needless conflict and confers upon him positive assurance and reinforcement in what he undertakes."<sup>45</sup>

Citizens willing to exercise their citizenship, functioning civil society organizations and empowered communities are unlikely to succeed with their efforts unless changes to attitudes, working styles, planning procedures and modes of service delivery on the government's side occur. Our case study has revealed that Chinese CSOs such as SSCA are already applying a great number of strategies in collaborations with the government. In terms of establishing a collaboration mechanism they have followed the 'First-in-Command strategy', helped set up specialized project groups, and gained influence through repeated meetings with government officials. By emphasizing process thinking they have become the driving force in collaborations with the government. Other applied CSO strategies included 'helping the government to achieve', 'serving as a bridge between the sectors and between different levels of hierarchy', 'showcasing the results of cross-sector collaboration', and 'getting the support of academia and media'. SSCA has been successfully applying such CSO strategies in order to introduce concepts of sustainability, consistency in purpose, as well as interactionist ideas and practices. By doing so they have initiated open-ended processes of communication, consultation and cooperation between government officials, social scientists, and community residents. Such experiments of cross sector collaboration between such varied stakeholder groups signify an incremental change from government control (guanzhi) to public management (guanli) to network governance (zhili).

Critics of CSO strategies as exemplified by the practices of Shining Stone Community Action (SSCA) may argue that even successful experiments with cross-sectoral collaboration will only lead to new forms of party-state corporatism. Yet such reasoning

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<sup>44</sup> Yu, K.P. (2000), 'Toward an Incremental Democracy and Governance: Chinese Theories and Assessment Criteria', February 2000.

<sup>45</sup> Dewey, John 1927, *The Public and its Problems*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press. 1954. 71f.

underestimates the transformative nature of learning processes that accompany such open-ended processes of collaboration. Once Chinese civil society practitioners and local government officials start to interact, they continuously learn and adapt to new situations. Through interaction, both sides realise that rather than pursuing 'lose-lose' or 'win-lose' strategies they can also create 'win-win' situations. By 'using government rhetoric to change government concepts' and 'working with the government to change government thinking' SSCA has been able to repeatedly create 'win-win' situations, enhancing the government's trust in the organisation and making system innovation possible. This is by no means a small achievement given the prevailing 'winner takes all' attitude in Chinese politics.<sup>46</sup> By helping reformist government officials experience 'win-win' situations in interactive processes, Chinese civil society practitioners also achieve their own objectives. By finding constructive solutions to problems they gain increased government recognition as legitimate actors in China's multifaceted modernization drive.

### **About the authors**

**Ms Song Qinghua** has eleven years of experience working in non-profit organizations. Before 1997, she worked as an economist on projects related to energy and environment protection in a major steel company. She got the calling of her new career in 1997, when Ms. Liao Xiaoyi, president of the well-known civic environment organization Global Village of Beijing (GVB), invited her to join the organization as its deputy director. During her time at GVB, Ms. Song organized "Green Community", a grassroots environment initiative to increase public awareness and to educate ordinary citizens to take actions, such as conserving energy and water, and sorting garbage, in their daily life routines. In December 2001, Ms. Song further understood the importance of a participation-based approach to community development when she visited the United Kingdom with a Chinese delegation to study urban governance and community development. That was also when she obtained her initial training in urban governance and participatory community renewal at the University of Sussex. In August 2002, she went to South Africa with a Chinese NGO delegation to take part in the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development, where she realized the critical role of community development and community participation in today's global society. Together with a colleague Ms. Song founded Shining Stone Community Action in December 2002, a Beijing-based nonprofit organisation which she helped nurture in

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<sup>46</sup> Fewsmith, Joseph, *Elite Politics in Contemporary China*. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, Inc. 2001.

her capacity as a director for the past seven years. Since 2002 Ms. Song Qinghua has used participatory methods in more than 100 trainings all across China. Among the more than 8,000 trainees there have been government officials, local community workers, as well as community activists.

**Dr Li Yanyan** is Associate Professor at Komazawa University, a private university in Tokyo, Japan. She graduated from Jilin University in China. She had studied Japanese language and Japanese literature for eleven years before she went to Japan in 1993. From 1994 to 2000 she studied sociology at the Graduate School of Arts & Letters of Tohoku University. Her research interests include volunteer groups and NPOs, civil society leadership, organizational development, networks, relationship with government, and supporting systems. She was the first scholar to conduct comparative sociological studies of the voluntary sector in Japan and China. She has written and published her doctoral dissertation on "Formation and development of the voluntary sector: the possibilities and the logic in the voluntary sector of Japan and China" (Mineruva Press, 2002). Since 2001 she has expanded her research to include issues such as community organizations and has started to study social changes in urban communities focusing on NGOs and neighbourhood activities. Her publications include "Emerging grassroots NGOs in China: the way toward civil society" (Koseisya koseikaku Press, 2008), and "NPOs in China" (co-authored by Wang Ming, and Okamuro Mieko, Daichisyolin press, 2002). All of them are written in Japanese.

**Dr Andreas Fulda** is Lecturer at the School of Contemporary Chinese Studies. He obtained his B.A. Modern China Studies and Political Science from the East Asia Institute, Cologne University and his M.A. Chinese Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University. He concluded his Ph.D. on "Promoting Participatory Development in the PR China. Opportunities for and Obstacles to Political Aid in Sino-German Development Cooperation (2003-2006)" at the Department of Political and Social Sciences, Free University (FU) Berlin, and published his thesis as a book in October 2008. He has published in internationally referred journals such as Critical Asian Studies and the International Quarterly for Asian Studies. Furthermore he has written opinion-editorials and country profiles for the German media, e.g. Das Parlament and F.A.Z.-Institut. Prior to his posting at the School of Contemporary Chinese Studies, Dr Fulda worked as a development practitioner for Sino-German development cooperation. He raised close to 200,000 Euros and implemented a total number of eight development initiatives between 2004 and 2007. This included a comprehensive two-year program of participatory urban governance, which was supported by the Human Rights and Democracy Fund (HRDF) of the Bureau of

Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL), US Department of State. Dr Fulda is currently academic advisor to a two-year social policy advocacy training program supported by the Rockefeller Brothers Fund (RBF) and implemented jointly by the China Association for NGO Cooperation (CANGO) and the American Bar Association (ABA) from 2009 - 2011.