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## **The EU-China High Level People-to-People Dialogue: why it is important and how to make it work**

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### **Significance**

The 'third pillar' of Europe's relationship with China - called the EU-China High Level People-to-People Dialogue - continues to be underfunded. This limits the effectiveness of citizen diplomacy at the intersection of government, private sector and civil society. The European Commission should remedy this shortcoming by providing more funding for grassroots level dialogues involving European and Chinese civil societies.

### **What we need to know**

European funding for people-to-people dialogues with China is critical to support China's transition towards a more open society based upon the rule of law and respect for human rights. As many global problems can no longer be solved by governments and the private sector alone, citizen diplomacy is central for the EU-China strategic partnership to thrive.

While the European Commission has taken a laudable first step in establishing the EU-China High Level People-to-People Dialogue, it currently lacks the necessary funding mechanism to achieve meaningful impact. European decision makers could address this shortcoming by learning from EU-China initiatives which have promoted dialogue and cooperation between European and Chinese civil societies in the past. From 2005 until 2013 European and Chinese civil society actors have successfully experimented with new demand-led, participatory and grassroots level dialogue formats. Building on the foundations of these initiatives, the European Commission should support a minimum of twenty dialogue forums and ten study tours in Europe and China between 2015 and 2020.

A particularly effective way to encourage the rise of an open society in China is the establishment of a new EU-China People-to-People Dialogue Support Facility (P2PDSF), modeled in part on the successful EU-China Policy Dialogue Support Facility II (PDSF). The Chinese government is more likely to embrace this if it can reasonably assume that such dialogue is aimed at social and cultural exchanges. Topics of mutual interest include the eight fields of education, environment, culture, civil society, public sector reform, disability, gender and LGBT, and youth. By supporting people-to-people dialogues financially, the European Commission could strengthen the 'third pillar' of its dialogue architecture, thus allowing for both a critical and constructive dialogue across civilizations.

## **The ‘third pillar’ of the EU-China dialogue architecture**

European engagement with China has traditionally focused on partnerships with organisations under direct control of the Chinese Communist Party. Such engagement with what can be termed “official China” has come at the expense of a wider engagement with “unofficial China”. Chinese civil society organisations (CSO) and social enterprises for many years have been excluded from overseas development aid (ODA). In the wake of China’s continuous economic growth and its successful alleviation of poverty during the past thirty years, European member states are now phasing out their bilateral development assistance.<sup>1</sup>

A new donor landscape has emerged in which multilateral organisations try to remedy some of the shortcomings of conventional bilateral technical cooperation. After more than 30 years of market transformation and state modernisation in China they have developed innovative partnership models which now also include Chinese civil society stakeholders. The European Commission provides funding to European and Chinese CSO through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, the NGO Co-financing mechanism, and the thematic instrument Non-State Actors and Local Authorities for Development.

The increasing willingness of European decision makers to include societal actors in the expanding EU-China relationship is evident at the policy level. Ten years after the initial endorsement of the 2003 policy paper “A maturing partnership: shared interests and challenges in EU-China relations” by the European Commission, the much lauded EU-China strategic partnership now goes beyond the well-established two pillars of the Political Dialogue and the Economic and Sectoral Dialogue. In April 2012 the European Union and the Government of the People’s Republic of China signed a joint declaration for the first round of a EU-China High Level People-to-People Dialogue. Called ‘the third pillar’ of the EU-China dialogue architecture, this strand of the growing EU-China relationship is intended to strengthen people-to-people exchanges.

People-to-people exchanges in this context are understood as “a longstanding notion underpinning any action aiming to enhance international understanding and friendship through educational, cultural and humanitarian activities involving the exchange of ideas and experiences directly among peoples of different countries and diverse cultures”.<sup>2</sup>

Such citizen diplomacy can be considered an alternative problem-solving strategy underpinning the role that non-state actors may play in mitigating difficult interstate relations and help resolve deep-rooted conflicts that that political leaders and the private sector can not solve alone. Arguably, change in the 21st century will take place at the intersection of government, private sector and civil society.

While the policy rhetoric suggests an enhanced European engagement with China, most of the activities that have been officially attributed to the third pillar of people-to-people dialogue so far have in fact been existing or ongoing initiatives in the fields of education, culture, researcher mobility, and youth.<sup>3</sup> Few new initiatives have arisen.

The 2012 EU-China Year of the Intercultural Dialogue is a case in the point. Participating European and Chinese organisations were allowed to use the name and logo of the Year of Intercultural Dialogue if they could prove that their ongoing activities contributed to the Year’s objectives. The labeling approach suggests that while the European Commission was happy to take credit for existing and ongoing initiatives, it was not willing to provide adequate funding commensurate with the objective of promoting intercultural dialogue between Europe and China. New initiatives developed specifically for the Year were required to draw on existing funding mechanisms such as the MEDIA Mundus Audiovisual Programme or the EU-China Trade Project.

The gap between the European Commission's willingness to commit to a broader and inclusive policy agenda with China and the lack of additional funding support for it has already been evident during the previous 2011 EU-China Year of Youth. While European decision makers gave their political endorsement for an exchange programme involving 100 European and 100 Chinese young people, they overlooked the financial implications of such an initiative. As a consequence, European implementing agencies later struggled to find adequate budget sources to support the high level political commitment for the EU-China youth exchange programme.

The need to match new policy commitments with relevant funding sources is highlighted by the examples from the 2011 EU-China Year of Youth and the 2012 EU-China Year of Intercultural Dialogue. According to the "Joint Declaration on the first round of the 'EU-China High Level People-to-People Dialogue'" the action is supposed to "be characterised - like the other two high level dialogues - by a flexible structure and lack of bureaucracy".<sup>4</sup> This is not apparent in experience so far.

Unlike government agencies or private sector organisations most European civil society organisations do not have their own budgets to finance fact-finding missions in China. When European civil society practitioners participate in EU-sponsored dialogue forums in China, this provides them with a unique and cost-effective opportunity to reach out to their Chinese counterparts. Both European and Chinese dialogue participants can significantly enhance their mutual knowledge and understanding by engaging in conference-based learning. Chinese civil society so far has managed to survive in a difficult political environment. At the same time increasing numbers of Chinese civil society organisations are facing the strategic challenge of dwindling international support.<sup>5</sup> European Commission financial support for a new series of people-to-people dialogue forums in China thus would send out a strong signal of support. European decision makers could draw on some of the illuminating experiences gained during previous civil society dialogue initiatives funded either partly or wholly by the European Union to inform the design of a new dialogue initiative.

### **Learning from past EU-China civil society dialogue initiatives**

What can be learned from previous EU-China civil society dialogue initiatives? Three flagship projects merit a closer look, as precursors of an institutionalized EU-China people to people dialogue. These initiatives, implemented by different organisations and trans-national networks, have actively supported people-to-people exchanges between Europe and China during the past eight years: the China-Europe Forum (2005-2010), the EU-China Civil Society Forum (2008-2010), and the EU-China Civil Society Dialogue on Participatory Public Policy (2011-2013).

The earliest of these was the China-Europe Forum, a dialogue programme that receiving its initial support from the French Charles Léopold Mayer Foundation in 2005. It aimed to "strengthen the dialog (sic) between European and Chinese societies and within each society"<sup>6</sup>. The China-Europe Forum organised three biennial meetings: in China (2005) Europe (2007), and again in China (2010). The second biennial meeting, in Brussels, was supported by the European Union and involved 850 participants from 23 cities in eight European countries. This initiative established many European-Chinese partnerships at the municipal level.

The second initiative was the provision by the European Union of funding to the EU-China Civil Society Forum (2008-2010), for a development education project implemented by the Stiftung Asienhaus of Germany. This three year programme aimed modestly to "enable informed public debate on China and Europe-China relations within the EU."<sup>7</sup> In practice, it achieved much more. It not only invited European and Chinese civil society organisations to form an open network, but also

facilitated study tours in Europe and China as well as organising three symposia, one in China and two in Europe. A key finding of this initiative was the recommendation that European “NGOs should not only work on but with China” and that “the cooperation between European civil society organisations must be strengthened”.<sup>8</sup>

The third initiative arose from a call launched by the European Commission (February 2010) to bid for an EU-China Civil Society Dialogue of a million Euro grant.<sup>9</sup> The University of Nottingham responded successfully to this call with six consortium partners: China Association for NGO Cooperation, Institute for Civil Society at Sun Yat-sen University, University of Nottingham Ningbo China, Stiftung Asienhaus, Great Britain-China Centre and Global Links Initiative. They organised eight civil society dialogues and two international conferences, held in Ningbo, Guangzhou, Beijing and Bonn between January 2011 and September 2013.

The EU-China Civil Society Dialogue Programme on Participatory Public Policy (2011-2013) included target groups such as community based organisation(s), consumers, disabled, educational organisations, local authorities, migrants, non-government organisations, women, and young people and reached out to reform-minded cadres, civil society practitioners, public intellectuals, educators, journalists, lawyers, community residents, and rural migrants. Between 2011 and 2013 800 participants deliberated on a range of issues including climate change, environmental health, labour relations, child welfare, social entrepreneurship, information disclosure, government procurement of CSO services and disability rights. Going beyond deliberation, European and Chinese participants put insights into practice and jointly designed and implemented fourteen follow-up initiatives for civil society participation in public policy, all tested and implemented in local communities across China. This third initiative thus revealed the potential of turning innovative ideas generated during the dialogue forums into actionable pilot initiatives.

These three dialogue initiatives indicate the ability of the European Union to tap into the diversity and vitality of existing civil society networks and to become an active supporter of people-to-people dialogues between Europe and China. The European Commission can deepen its engagement with China by building on the foundations of the three dialogue initiatives. To this end, the European Commission could take the lead and issue a call in 2014 for the establishment of a EU-China People-to-People Dialogue Support Facility (P2PDSF).

The P2PDSF should build on the insight of the China-Europe Forum by reaching out to mainstream European and Chinese society on the municipal rather than national level. Ideally, it should be tasked to inform the European public about the rationale for a deepened China engagement, as was the case with the EU-China Civil Society Forum. Furthermore, to be more than just a ‘talking shop’, it should adopt the action-orientation of the EU-China Civil Society Dialogue on Participatory Public Policy and provide funding for follow-up activities, e.g. in the form of study tours in Europe and China.

### **Making citizen diplomacy work**

How would a People-to-People Dialogue Support Facility (P2PDSF) work in practice? If we take the successful model of the third initiative above, the EU-China Civil Society Dialogue Programme (2011-13), the shape becomes clearer. It would run for five years, from 2015 until 2020, to ensure results. It needs sufficient resources to implement a minimum of twenty dialogue forums and ten study tours in Europe and China. As in the EU-China Civil Society, these study tours would be embedded in an ongoing dialogue and be action-based. This would require an estimated budget of five to eight million Euros.<sup>10</sup>

The proposed P2PDSF could be administered either by a single organisation or a consortium. The implementers of the P2PDSF would need to provide a transparent set of evaluation criteria for the selection of dialogue proposals. Here the established protocols of the EU-China Policy Dialogue Support Facility II (PDSF) could provide a useful reference.<sup>11</sup> As the EU-China High Level People-to-People Dialogue aims to “identify opportunities for cooperation based on mutual interest and reciprocity”<sup>12</sup> the P2PDSF could be given a remit to promote grassroots-level dialogues in the eight fields of education, environment, culture, civil society, public sector reform, disability, gender and LGBT, and youth. Civil society dialogue programmes in general (2005 – 2013) have shown that they are more successful if the topics for discussion are both specific and relevant for the European and Chinese sides.

European decision makers should also consider eligibility when drafting a call. The support facility should allow non-profit making non-governmental organisations, public sector operators and higher education institutions to apply for dialogue funding. In the Chinese context, non-profit making non-governmental organisations should be understood in the broadest possible sense and allow both Government-organised NGOs (GONGOs) as well as grassroots NGOs to apply jointly with their European counterparts. Such a balanced approach involving both officially-sanctioned GONGOs as well as tacitly tolerated grassroots NGOs would considerably reduce the political sensitivity of such an initiative in the eyes of the Chinese authorities as well as making the dialogues more inclusive.

The P2PDSF has the potential to renew the tradition of citizen diplomacy based on the key principles of solidarity, subsidiarity, reciprocity and sustainability. These principals were developed during the implementation of the EU-China Civil Society Dialogue Programme and helped foster a climate of constructive communication and collaboration among intercultural groups. Solidarity postulates that societal self-organization in China is an ongoing historical process which deserves attention and active support by European civil societies. Subsidiarity is about European civil society playing a supporting role for Chinese civil society rather than the role of an advocate. Reciprocity emphasizes that cooperation between European and Chinese civil society should be based on burden and benefit sharing. Finally, sustainability is understood as long-term partnerships between European and Chinese civil societies which require appreciation, joint effort, trust and friendship among individuals. In order to be truly sustainable, such bridge building should be supported with the help of European funding.

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*Views and assessments articulated in the CPI Policy Papers are that of the author/s. They do not necessarily represent the views of the CPI at the University of Nottingham.*

## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> European Commission, “EU-China High-Level People to People Dialogue (HPPD)”, available online: [http://ec.europa.eu/education/external-relation-programmes/china\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/external-relation-programmes/china_en.htm) (accessed 10 September 2013).

<sup>3</sup> European Union, “Follow-up Actions Of The First Round of the EU-China High Level People-to-People Dialogue (HPPD)”, available online: [http://ec.europa.eu/education/external-relation-programmes/doc/china/follow\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/external-relation-programmes/doc/china/follow_en.pdf) (accessed 12 September 2013).

<sup>4</sup> European Union, “Joint declaration on the first round of the ‘EU-China High Level People-to-People Dialogue’”, available online: [http://ec.europa.eu/education/external-relation-programmes/doc/china/joint12\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/external-relation-programmes/doc/china/joint12_en.pdf) (accessed 10 September 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Deng Guosheng 2013, “The Decline of Foreign Aid and the Dilemma of the Chinese Grassroots NGOs”, Religions & Christianity in Today's China, Vol. III, 2013, No. 1 and Yu Fangqiang 2013, “Now More Important Than Ever: International NGOs Should Increase, Not Reduce, Their Support for Chinese Civil Society Organizations”, Available online: [http://www.eu-china.net/web/cms/upload/pdf/materialien/2013\\_06-Fangqiang\\_Support-for-Chinese-NGOs.pdf](http://www.eu-china.net/web/cms/upload/pdf/materialien/2013_06-Fangqiang_Support-for-Chinese-NGOs.pdf) (accessed 26 November 2013).

<sup>6</sup> China-Europe Forum, “Together, let's contribute to constructing a responsible world Dialog - Understanding - Reacting - Suggesting”, Available online: [http://china-europa-forum.net/index\\_en.html](http://china-europa-forum.net/index_en.html) (accessed 11 September 2013).

<sup>7</sup> EU-China Civil Society Forum, “EU-China: For social and ecological justice”, Available online: [http://www.eu-china.net/web/cms/upload/pdf/materialien/eu-china\\_2008\\_flyer\\_eng.pdf](http://www.eu-china.net/web/cms/upload/pdf/materialien/eu-china_2008_flyer_eng.pdf) (accessed 11 September 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Nora Sausmikat 2010, “China viewed from the European Civil Society perspective”, in: Nora Sausmikat, Klaus Fritzsche (Eds) 2010, Civil Society in European-Chinese Relations. Challenges of Cooperation. 96.

<sup>9</sup> European Commission. Development and Cooperation - EuropeAid 2010, “Calls for proposals & Procurement notices. EU-China Civil Society Dialogue” Available online: <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/europeaid/online-services/index.cfm?ADSSChck=1333973128456&do=publi.detPUB&searchtype=AS&Pgm=7573836&aoet=36537&debpub=&orderby=upd&orderbyad=Desc&nbPubliList=15&page=2&aoref=129551> (accessed 9 April 2012).

<sup>10</sup> The new P2PDSF could make use of some of the existing modalities of the existing EU-China Policy Dialogue Support Facility II (PDSF). This government-to-government dialogue initiative facilitates sectoral dialogues in the fields of agriculture, education and culture, enterprise, water resources, IT and Telecoms, rural development, S&T, urbanisation, transportation, environment, social development and trade. The PDSF is noteworthy for its transparent mechanisms for drafting and evaluating proposals. Only dialogue initiatives which have received a formal endorsement from the participating European and Chinese government institutions are being considered for funding. This precondition strengthens the joint responsibility for the dialogues among European and Chinese cooperation partners.

<sup>11</sup> EU-China Policy Dialogue Support Facility II, “How to apply”, available online: <http://www.eu-chinapdsf.org/EN/NewsInfo.asp?NewsId=1235> (accessed 12 September 2013).

<sup>12</sup> European Union, “Joint declaration on the first round of the ‘EU-China High Level People-to-People Dialogue’”, available online: [http://ec.europa.eu/education/external-relation-programmes/doc/china/joint12\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/external-relation-programmes/doc/china/joint12_en.pdf) (accessed 10 September 2013).