

VOLUNTEERISM IN CHINA'S SSC: PROMOTING A HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT AGENDA

China's South-South cooperation (SSC) includes a modality known as "people-to-people exchange". Volunteering is a key exchange within this modality and a growing part of China's overseas development strategy. In theory, it embodies China's "win-win" cooperation by benefitting the host community, the provider community, and the individual volunteer. It also helps ensure a "participatory approach" to development at the local, national, and international level. This brief explores how in China, as well as across the Global South, momentum that has built up domestically gives volunteerism a foundation to play a prominent role in future cooperation and help countries achieve the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)ⁱ.

Global trends

Volunteering has become increasingly recognized as a development modality. Since the mid-20th century many large national and international volunteering programmes have been established. Organisations such as Volunteer Services Overseas (VSO) - which since 1958 has sent 43,000 volunteers to work in more than 120 countries - and Peace Corps - which since 1961 has sent nearly 220,000 volunteers to 140 countries - mobilise thousands of volunteers each yearⁱⁱ. Done well, volunteerism can build capacity, make governance more participatory, and increase social inclusion. However, volunteerism is not a panacea. Many volunteering schemes have been criticised for not responding to local needs, reinforcing unequal relationships, and, following the global economic downturn, focusing too much on providing services that governments should deliver and marginalising the benefits to the volunteer and the values of volunteerism itselfⁱⁱⁱ. Today stronger enabling environments in developing countries have created new domestic and international volunteering programmes, offering potential new solutions and opportunities for cooperation.

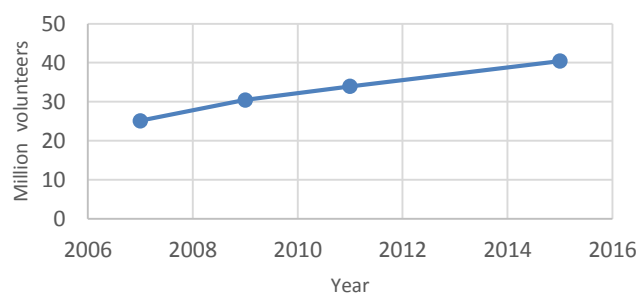
Volunteering in China, for China

Volunteerism has experienced a resurgence in China. The core tenets of volunteering can be found in Chinese traditional culture, religion, and philosophy. However in recent years the value of volunteering has received increasing recognition from government, society, and business. This trend has several interlinked causes. Firstly, central and local governments have begun to diversify their approach to the delivery of social services. Secondly there has been political recognition of the value of volunteering in China's new "people-orientated" growth. China's 12th Five Year Plan in 2010 included volunteering as a key modality to deliver China's development goals^{iv}. Thirdly, a non-profit sector has been established which

includes many organisations that rely on volunteers. Finally, catalytic events such as the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, in which over a million people volunteered, and the 2008 Beijing Olympics, which had 1.5 million volunteers, have created heightened popularity and public awareness of volunteering^v.

Over the past two decades an ecosystem of government agencies, policies, and regulations has developed. At the policy-level the Central Office for Guiding Ethical Progress of the Communist Party of China (a supra-ministerial body) sets norms that guide volunteerism. The Ministry of Civil Affairs has its own community-based volunteer programme and the All-China Youth Federation and the China Young Volunteers Association (CYVA) - part of the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League (CCCYL) - have a very large youth volunteering network.

Registered CYVA Volunteers



The chart above shows only the total number of registered CYVA volunteers. It uses data compiled from CYVA sources.

The Ministry of Education finances the volunteering component of the prominent "Go West Development Plan" - implemented by the CCCYL (mainly by the CYVA) - which since 2002 has sent thousands of university graduates to volunteer in China's western provinces in the education, health, agriculture, engineering, and poverty-alleviation sectors. Alongside this government system many new Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Government Organized NGOs (GONGOs), and foundations, have been established which rely on and promote volunteerism.

Volunteering by China, for other countries

As a result of mainstreaming and better governance of volunteerism *within* China, there is increasing interest in volunteering becoming a larger part of China's overseas development cooperation, and more specifically as part of increased "people to people exchange"^{vi}. Within this modality, volunteering is mentioned in key policy documents, including both China's "White Papers" on Foreign Aid" (2011 and 2014). Volunteering also features in China's planned engagement with

its largest development partner, Africa. In 2014, as part of the “China-Africa People-to-People Friendship Action” plan, China pledged to strengthen volunteerism in Africa^{vii}.

The 2014 White Paper states that between 2010- 2012 China sent around 7,000 volunteers to over 60 countries, highlighting projects in Liberia and Ethiopia, and work on agriculture and clean energy^{viii}. China’s flagship programme – the Overseas Youth Volunteer Program - was established in 2002 and is implemented by the CYVA and overseen by the Ministry of Commerce’s Department of Foreign Aid (DFA). Although it remains small in comparison, it is sometimes called “China’s Peace Corps” and every year its advertised positions receive many applications. Between 2002 and 2013, it sent 590 volunteers to 22 countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Among these numbers, most volunteers were sent to African countries, some to Southeast Asian countries such as Laos and Thailand, with the only Latin American host being Guyana^{ix}. Another, larger volunteer programme – the Volunteer Chinese Teacher Program - was established in 2004 and is run by the Chinese Language Council International (Hanban) under the Ministry of Education. Between 2004 and 2012 it sent over 18,000 volunteer language teachers to 101 countries in Asia, Europe, America, Africa and Oceania^x.

Volunteering in and by other developing countries

Outside of China, and despite political, social, and economic variation, the values that underpin volunteering can be found throughout other developing country societies. For example in the Southern African philosophy of Ubuntu, and as a religious obligation in the Muslim and Hindu religions. In some contexts volunteering is primarily informal while in others there are vibrant formal volunteering programmes. For example, countries such as Honduras, Peru, and Ghana have strong laws, resources, and organisations that facilitate people to volunteer. Elsewhere, the prominence of certain issues – for example HIV/AIDS – has caused the formation of strong volunteering.

International programs and volunteering as an overseas development modality has also advanced in other developing countries beyond China. Nigeria’s Technical Aid Corps is an example of an established program. It was formed in 1987 as a “practical demonstration of South-South co-operation” and from 2014-2016 will send out 1,500 volunteers^{xi}. Recent years have also seen the creation of regional platforms. The ASEAN Youth Volunteer Programme (AYVP) - established in 2011 as part of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Blueprint - aims to promote sustainable development, intercultural understanding, and regional identity^{xii}. Another example is the South African SayXchange program which was “developed by Africans for Africans” to foster a regional Southern African identity and promote intercultural understanding^{xiii}.

Future trends and challenges

In a post-2015 context, the needs for volunteerism are likely to continue to rise. In particular, ageing populations and rising global inequality makes volunteerism and people-to-people exchange more critical. It is therefore good news that across developing countries, significant momentum is being built up domestically and internationally with more awareness and enabling environments for volunteerism being created.

This momentum can lead to future cooperation. However, significant work remains to be done. Firstly, priority should be given to knowledge-building and two-way exchange programs to encourage mutually beneficial experiences and to find

common ground between programs that have a range of aims, values, and working practices. Secondly, conceptions of volunteering also need to broaden so that traditional programmes can cooperate with and learn from informal or community-based groups. Thirdly, there needs to be political space for civil society and a strong legal framework to protect volunteers and volunteering organizations. Fourthly, the value of volunteering exchanges needs to be demonstrated to governments and societies through increased research and dialogue. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, equal access is needed. Often, marginalised groups lack awareness and equal opportunities to volunteering. In many societies women spend their lives as informal “volunteers” but cannot access formal programs. Creating open, fully-funded, and multi-lingual programmes can help overcome these barriers.

To tackle these issues China and other developing countries can leverage multilateral organisations such as the UNDP and UNV to assist in building partnerships, sharing experience and learning from existing informal or community based groups. In recent years, trilateral work has already begun to play a role, such as UNV’s collaboration with the African Development Bank to establish the ECOWAS Volunteers Programme (2009), and partnership with the African Union to create the African Union Youth Volunteer Corps (2010)^{xiv}. As the newly adopted SDGs recognize, development should be equally spread to be sustainable. While volunteerism cannot by itself address the major structural inequalities the world faces, volunteering by and across *all* countries nevertheless is and should remain a critical part of the future we aim for.

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ⁱ As recognized by the UN Secretary General in his recent report on the post-2015 development agenda. See “Synthesis Report on the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda” (2015) p. 36, para 131. Available at http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/69/700&Lang=E

ⁱⁱ See <http://www.vsointernational.org/about/history> and <http://www.peacecorps.gov/about/fastfacts/>

ⁱⁱⁱ See *Guardian* (2013) “Beware the ‘voluntourists’ doing good” available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/feb/13/beware-voluntourists-doing-good>

^{iv} For an English translation see <http://www.britishchamber.cn/content/chinas-twelfth-five-year-plan-2011-2015-full-english-version>

^v Brown, Kerry (2011), “The State of Volunteerism in China”, available at <http://www.kerry-brown.co.uk/files/website-6.pdf>

^{vi} In 2013 President Xi Jinping declared people-to-people exchange an “important pillar for the new type [of] strategic relationship between China and Africa” See *Xinhua* (2013), “China will be Africa’s all-weather friend and partner: Chinese president”, available at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-03/30/c_124522273.htm

^{vii} See UNDP China (2014), “China’s Evolving Africa Policy” available at <http://www.cn.undp.org/content/dam/china/docs/Publications/UNDP-CH-SSC-chinas-evolving-africa-policy.pdf>

^{viii} For the English translation see http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-07/10/c_133474011.htm

^{ix} *State Council Information Office Briefing* (2013), Hongyan Wang, Secretary of the CYL Central Committee available at <http://www.news.cn/zhibo/20131202a/zhibo.htm>

^x See Hanban <http://www.hanban.org/volunteers>

^{xi} See Nigeria Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.dtac.gov.ng/DTAC/dtac/aboutDTAC>

^{xii} See AYVP “About Us” <http://www.ayvpukm.com.my/about-us/>

^{xiii} See SayXchange Information Brochure, http://www.sayxchange.org/sites/default/files/downloads/SayXchange_brochure_EN.pdf