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Society-Driven Disaster Response: New Model from China?

By Lin Peng and Fengshi Wu

Synopsis

The rise of a non-governmental relief sector in China, capable of cross-sector coordination in time of crisis, suggests that even in restrictive political environments social actors can play bigger roles in disaster response.

Commentary

DISASTER RESPONSE in China, dominated by the state, is gradually being driven by society. Coordinated large-scale disaster response by bottom-up social forces, however, did not emerge until the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008.

After a decade of development, a non-governmental relief sector has emerged with substantial capacity to not only respond to the specific needs of the affected population, but also facilitate cross-sectoral coordination and knowledge sharing among a broad scope of relevant actors.

Momentum from NGOs

In China, disaster management, including coordination of various resources and actors, has historically been managed by the state. Coordination among civil society, business, governmental agencies and all other sectors, however, is crucial for effective disaster response, both short-term and long-term.

Prior to the Wenchuan earthquake, civil society in China had enjoyed a relatively friendly environment – compared with more recent years – in terms of the growth of autonomous small-size non-governmental organisations (NGOs) at the grassroots level. Therefore, when the Wenchuan earthquake struck in May 2008, many NGOs specialised in environmental protection, education and poverty relief, improvised on

the spot and used their capacity of goods delivery, volunteer management and others for the purpose of emergency relief.

After 2008, some of the NGOs, activists and volunteers once involved in the relief work switched their focus and started to specialise in disaster relief. More importantly, thanks to their previous NGO experience, they consciously strived to establish informal mechanisms to coordinate resources with peer organisations and local authorities.

In the following years, such crisis-triggered ad hoc efforts of cross-sector coordination became increasingly recognised and accepted within the relief NGO community.

The temporary NGO partnerships during the relief operations of 2008 Wenchuan earthquake and 2010 Yushu earthquake later turned into registered organisations. For example, the Blue Sky Rescue based in Beijing leads a nation-wide web of professional rescuers. Under the umbrella of the Huaxia Commonwealth Service Centre, there are actually many connected partnership networks located in a number of cities across the country.

The core element of these NGO partnerships and platforms is to excel in knowledge sharing and collaboration among various stakeholders from different sectors. By organising online and offline meetings, and training workshops, these leading relief NGOs brought professional rescuers, community workers, businesses elites and governmental officials together under one roof or chat-room online.

Gradually, such NGO-led efforts for cross-sector dialogue turned into more regularised institution building.

Unique Role of Private Foundations

Another important driving force of bottom-up cross-sector coordination in disaster response in China has been a group of private foundations that have emerged in the new millennium. Leaders of these private charities are usually business or social elites that are sympathetic to civil society actors and keen on policy reforms.

For example, YouChange, a private foundation affiliated with the state-run China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation (CFPA), has consistently supported the efforts of routinization of coordination and collaboration between NGOs and governmental agencies in disaster management.

YouChange invited officials and experts from state agencies to attend workshops and training sessions tailor-made for relief NGOs so that the two sides, otherwise separated in their own worlds of work, can have some exchange and sharing of experiences.

One Foundation, founded by the movie star Jet Li, inherited much of the legacies of YouChange after 2011 and has since been the biggest funder in facilitating coordination among NGOs, big businesses, and governmental agencies in disaster management.

Lushan Quake: Breakthrough

The 2013 Lushan earthquake marked a new breakthrough in the development of China's NGO-led disaster response. NGOs and private charities for the first time broke the monopoly of state-run relief agencies over fund raising from public donation.

They were able to mobilise massive social resources to deliver more relief goods, respond to more calls for help, and support more long-term recovery projects. One Foundation alone received more than 380 million Renminbi, outperforming all state-run charities.

Taking full advantage of their networks of local partners, social media, and interactive mapping technology, relief NGOs acting together were able to gather more accurate information about relief needs, identify logistical problems better, and deliver goods faster than governmental agencies.

Because of the extraordinary success in the 2013 Lushan earthquake, One Foundation, joined by many other NGOs and private foundations, pushed forward the development of a nation-wide relief NGO network – the China NGO Centre for Disaster Risk Reduction. This is the first formal platform in China that coordinates resources and actors across civil society, government, and business in disaster management.

In 2016, key members of several NGO alliances successfully persuaded the China Charity Alliance and Ministry of Civil Affairs (MoCA) to establish a national committee for disaster management called the Committee of Disaster Relief of China Charity Alliance (CDR-CCA). Its members came from both the state and civil society. CDR-CCA will from now on secure NGO's regular participation in policy discussion at the state level in the field of disaster relief.

Lessons Learned

In a field once primarily dominated by the party-state, the newly developed relief NGO community in China has shown both willingness and capacity to persuade the powerful political and business actors to engage in more collaborative disaster response.

Judging from China's participation in recent responses to disasters outside the country, such as earthquakes in Nepal and Ecuador, the CDR-CCA has combined Chinese NGOs' expertise in mobilising indigenous social networks.

The alliance has also activated local knowledge and information crowdsourcing with Chinese governmental agencies' capacity to mobilise material resources in both relief goods delivery and infrastructure reconstruction. This new model of cross-sectoral collaboration in disaster relief practised by China may find its way to influence other countries in future.

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