

THINKING STRATEGICALLY ABOUT CIVIL SOCIETY ASSISTANCE IN CHINA



Supporting China's internal reform processes as a long-term, reliable and stable partner

Oliver Radtke, Robert Bosch Foundation, China Program Officer



CHINA
DEVELOPMENT
BRIEF



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During the past ten years Dr Fulda has helped design and implement three major capacity building initiatives for Chinese CSOs: the *Participatory Urban Governance Programme for Migrant Integration* (2006-07), the *Social Policy Advocacy Coalition for Healthy and Sustainable Communities* (2009-11) and the *EU-China Civil Society Dialogue Programme on Participatory Public Policy* (2011-14).

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Highlights from the interview

In 2006, the Stiftung officially established a focus area: “German–Chinese relations”. The first long-term media exchange project was established in 2008 and by now some initiatives have been running for more than six years. Key criteria for the selection are certainly the demand for and the impact and long-term sustainability of a given initiative.

Our China program is still a young one. We have matured from the start-up period to the next stage, but we are still new to the game and are still exploring new initiatives. This is one of the advantages of being a private foundation. It gives us a higher credibility— since people, and rightly so, do not assume we have a hidden political agenda— and provides us with high flexibility. We are most interested in designing projects that address specific needs of people in China and Germany. In the last seven years we mostly cooperated with German partners who have long-term experience on the ground in China.

The Robert Bosch Stiftung is a foundation that values collaboration a lot. We have all kinds of project set-ups, ranging from funding a project with minimal involvement to an intense cooperation partnership on an eye-to-eye level. Especially with the latter case, it is crucial to build trust and to be very specific about the goals and your own ideas. We are very much concerned about efficiency.

In general it could be said that the reason why the China programme was established was exactly to support China fledgling civil society and China as a transitional country par excellence, to support China’s internal reform processes and act as a long-term, reliable and stable partner. In terms of civil society a lot of things are very much in the early stages and that means, it is also a great chance to act as a platform between the EU and China and act as a mutual provider of a chance to meet, discuss, and exchange views.

The strict bilateral focus on German-Chinese or German-Japanese relations is in certain ways a very 20th century concept, characterized by a western liberal order. In a multipolar world things have changed. The Robert Bosch Stiftung is currently shifting the focus more towards the regional approach. For example, with our EU-China NGO Twinning program, we involve more than just German and Chinese partners but also NGOs from other EU member states. We are working on regional strategies when it comes to projects in Asia.

Our funds are limited. Therefore we are always looking for ways of handing over projects at a certain stage or reallocating our funds at the moment we feel we have a new partner which can take over the project, e.g. the state or other private organisations. Of course, this is always easier said than done. This is why the cooperation between foundations is essential.

This interview was conducted by Dr Andreas Fulda via Skype on 7 August 2014.



Interview transcript | Oliver Radtke

Andreas Fulda (AF): Since when has the Robert Bosch Stiftung been active in China and what are your key criteria for the selection of China-related initiatives? In case you support civil society initiatives, to what extent do you consider the Chinese government's position on civil society in your internal decision-making process?

Sustainability

Oliver Radtke (OR): In 2006, the Stiftung officially established a focus area: "German–Chinese relations". The first long-term media exchange project was established in 2008 and by now some initiatives have been running for more than six years. Key criteria for the selection are certainly the demand for and the impact and long-term sustainability of a given initiative. What we do in China, but also in other areas in the world, are activities focused on long-term effects. Our activities in and with China concentrate on the fields of media, education, good governance, civil society and culture. In the case of civil society in China the, at times, rather flexible position of the government is often crucial for the feasibility of projects. What the Chinese government is handing out in terms of new regulations is of vital interest to us; not in terms of blindly following government recommendations, but in terms of understanding what the government's position on certain topics is. In some areas we have close cooperation with the state, such as with our German-Chinese judge exchange program that we run in collaboration with the GIZ and the Supreme People's Court of China. In other areas, for example with our EU-China NGO Twinning project, together with Stiftung Asienhaus, we focus on the grassroots level of both EU and Chinese societies.

AF: If you reflect on the partners the Robert Bosch Stiftung has engaged with over the past years, do you see some changes with the partners you are working with? So for example, do you work a lot with government organisations, intermediary organisations which could be termed government-organised non-governmental organisations (GONGOs) or also grassroots NGOs?

No hidden political agenda

OR: Our China program is still a young one. We have matured from the start-up period to the next stage, but we are still new to the game and are still exploring new initiatives. This is one of the advantages of being a private foundation. It gives us a higher credibility— since people, and rightly so, do not assume we have a hidden political agenda— and provides us with high flexibility. We are most interested in designing projects that address specific needs of people in China and Germany. In the last seven years we mostly cooperated with German partners who have long-term experience on the ground in China. The basic reason behind that is German tax law, which makes it rather difficult to directly support Chinese partners. We mostly work with local German partners who have offices in China, such as the GIZ, or who know the situation on the ground very well, such as Stiftung Asienhaus, who are implementing the EU-China NGO Twinning Programme.

AF: You are based in Stuttgart and work with German partners, who are either based in Germany or based in China— I understand GIZ still has

an office in Beijing. What are your experiences of “remote-controlling” initiatives in China from afar? To what extent do you as the Programme Officer China meet your partners? Do you travel to China every year, once or several times? To me it seems to be very important to have a personal impression of the projects and how they are going on.

OR: In the case of our international relations programs it is a very smart decision to have regional specialists working as program officers. First, there is the language issue. Secondly, you also need certain experience on the ground. I travel regularly to China, three to four times a year. The discussions with our German and Chinese partners are vital for all the projects that we do. We are in touch via telephone and email, but of course nothing beats the impressions on the ground. Visits to China not only allow me to express our appreciation to our partners on a regular basis, but also to experience atmospheric changes first-hand. I treasure these opportunities immensely.

AF: How do you square the circle of donorship and ownership of civil society initiatives?

OR: The Robert Bosch Stiftung is a foundation that values collaboration a lot. We have all kinds of project set-ups, ranging from funding a project with minimal involvement to an intense cooperation partnership on an eye-to-eye level. Especially with the latter case, it is crucial to build trust and to be very specific about the goals and your own ideas. We are very much concerned about efficiency. We want to know exactly how the money will be spent. Although we are often the main donor, we make sure that there is no David and Goliath situation but a mutually respectful approach. Often one side brings in the specialist knowledge, the other side the management expertise.

Efficiency

AF: When you work with external partners, in terms of the partnership model do you prefer a particular type of partnership model over another, e.g. a single-entry partnership model of a maximum of two organisations over a multi-entry partnership model of two or more partners?

OR: The only way to succeed in international understanding is to approach everything as a two-way street. Projects themselves are also about mutual understanding and mutual learning. In that case, there is no preferred standard model of cooperation. We rather approach the identified demand very pragmatically. For example, in the framework of “Media Ambassadors China-Germany”, an exchange program for young journalists from both countries, we cooperate with the International Media Centre in Hamburg, which is an international cooperation platform of the University for Applied Sciences (Hochschule für Angewandte Wissenschaften) and Tsinghua University in Beijing. Both organisations implement certain project aspects for us, such as the design of seminar or the organization of the selection interviews. In this case the multi-entry partnership model fits nicely. I prefer the kind of partnership model that works best for the task at hand. The key criterion is to find a partnership model that works most efficiently.

Media Ambassadors
China-Germany

AF: Do you have an organisational view of Chinese civil society? If yes, how would you describe it? If not, who is framing the discourse about China's civil society in your organisation and how?

Civil society

OR: China-related questions in the Robert Bosch Stiftung all land on my desk (laughs). Of course we do not rely on our in-house opinion alone. We are all in close contact with external partners. In general it could be said that the reason why the China programme was established was exactly to support China fledgling civil society and China as a transitional country par excellence, to support China's internal reform processes and act as a long-term, reliable and stable partner. In terms of civil society a lot of things are very much in the early stages and that means, it is also a great chance to act as a platform between the EU and China and act as a mutual provider of a chance to meet, discuss, and exchange views. We want to provide experiences from Germany that are of relevance to China. And of course while Germany has a longer history of civil society engagement it did not invent the concept. This is why the exchange of information, the exchange of experiences on a level of mutual understanding is the most important starting point for us.

AF: You point out that it is still early days in terms of civil society in China. Where do you see Chinese civil society in 5-10 years, based on your observations?

OR: As we all know with China, it is a very challenging undertaking to make any kind of prognosis that goes beyond the next year. In terms of the official discourse the idea is that the Chinese state is retreating from certain areas of social welfare and this is a great chance for Chinese civil society to step in. At the same time I see the danger that the official discourse understands civil society initiatives as mere substitutes of former state-run welfare activities, a kind of corporate, entrepreneurial substitute for services that were originally state-run, e.g. community services. This definition is, of course, rather narrow. There is great potential for Chinese civil society if the concept is less politically loaded. It could be thriving but I also see the present-day boundaries that Chinese civil society at the moment is not allowed to cross.

AF: Do you have a strategic plan for your programme activities? When you support initiatives you must have some kind of change objectives or a philosophy of change in areas where you would like to see some progress on the individual, organisational, community, societal and/or policy level? A lot of foundations seem to consider influence on policy as the gold standard of their work. Do you have some similar objectives?

Individuals

OR: The change we want to enable is the change of the individual, at least the change of perspective. There cannot be any change without the change of the individual. You need people to be on-site, and experience things on a personal level. A very successful example is the Media Ambassador programme. The young Chinese and German journalists live and work in the other country three months, during which you see change already happening. They are inspired to get an insight into very different media systems and take home a lot of ideas, stories and a better understanding of the other. If an organisation understands itself as a learning organisation and they are generally open to new ideas and ways of doing things, then

I think there is a good chance that they will profit from the experience of the individual as well. On the policy level, let me mention the judge exchange programme again. In the Supreme People's Court of China (SPC) we have people who are extremely supportive of this project. Because they understand this idea of bringing Chinese judges to Germany and the other way around, not just for the sake of exchanging information on how to handle certain things, but also to allow Chinese judges gain an awareness of the self-understanding, self-worth and the role of judges in German society. The judge exchange programme is only in its fourth year and it is thus too early to talk about influences on the policy level. But the support the judges get from this programme and the SPC shows that they are very interested in using the experiences within this programme to see change happening on their side as well.

Judges

AF: This is a good example how international understanding can be promoted through exchange programmes. Over the past years my thinking about EU-China civil society exchanges has evolved. While mutual visits can be enlightening for the people involved in such exchange programmes, I also noticed that some of the language barriers and cultural differences remain major barriers to be overcome. Also I sometimes wonder about how the insights generated can be truly applied in organisations. If we talk about the rule of law for example the situation in Germany and China is very different. I increasingly see the need to connect Chinese practitioners and Chinese professionals with let's say Taiwanese counterparts or people in East- and Southeast Asia, people living and working in societies which are more similar to China. So my question is whether you are trying to connect China to East- and Southeast Asian countries?

OR: This is a very good point, indeed. The strict bilateral focus on German-Chinese or German-Japanese relations is in certain ways a very 20th century concept, characterized by a western liberal order. In a multipolar world things have changed. The Robert Bosch Stiftung is currently shifting the focus more towards the regional approach. For example, with our EU-China NGO Twinning program, we involve more than just German and Chinese partners but also NGOs from other EU member states. We are working on regional strategies when it comes to projects in Asia. With one project we bring young Korean, Japanese and Chinese counterparts together with German, French and Polish ones to talk about memory culture. Together with a number of partners, we run the program "Global Governance Futures— Robert Bosch Foundation Multilateral Dialogues", a young leaders program with participants from India, China, the US, Germany and Japan. With regional programs you are forced to think much more multilaterally. On the other hand, not every project is suitable for this kind of approach. For example, when Chinese judges are interested in "Law made in Germany", it does not make much sense to make them also learn about the Polish and Dutch model on top of it. In that case the bilateral approach is still very useful.

Regional approach

AF: We have just talked about regional approaches. Talking about more China-focused projects and programmes, what do you consider realistic outreach goals for initiatives funded by the Robert Bosch Stiftung? How transformative are your goals, how ambitious are you?

Step-by-step
approach

OR: This raises the question how we evaluate our programmes. The key is to have realistic goals. We will not be able to reach any short term fundamental change of any kind. We do not run programmes that nobody needs. In terms of the eight year old focus area “German-Chinese relations” it is probably too early to tell how fundamental the impact will be. If you take the engagement of the foundation with Poland, France or the United States you can very clearly see the results of thirty, forty years of engagement. Of course, China is a different story, but most important is that we do our work there in a step-by-step approach and that we present ourselves as a reliable partner who is there when needed, a partner with an open ear and an open mind. This is a value in itself and in China’s high-speed society a lot of people appreciate this rather down-to-earth approach.

AF: You are talking about long-term effects. In terms of short to medium-term effects many foundations are struggling to build up a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation system. In terms of reporting many partners have no problem in describing inputs and outputs, but they may struggle to explain the outcomes and possible impacts of their work. Do you require applicants to include social impact design and an evaluation strategy in their funding bids? If yes, can you provide specific examples?

Effectiveness

OR: We design and fund more than eight hundred projects a year. Therefore there is a whole spectrum of how we evaluate our programmes. Within the grant application process we are already very much interested in how our partners are planning to measure the project’s outcome. If you take the judge exchange programme it is very difficult to put down the effectiveness of this programme with numbers or with hard facts. We support twenty judges a year and once they go back to China with in-house trainings they are able to reach a couple of hundred judges more. Based on such calculations we could argue that we reach a thousand judges with the programme on a direct or intermediate basis. That is the statistics. As much as I love statistics, it is however much more important to see what the individual has gained from the experience. It is also important that results are formulated in a way that we know exactly what the project’s specific contribution has been. We are talking about contribution, not attribution. This means that when we evaluate our projects we should not take credit for developments outside the actual scope or intention of the project. That is a very essential question and part of a foundation-wide new approach to redesigning our evaluation strategy.

AF: I am asking this question about monitoring and evaluation not necessarily because I am particularly interested in the technicalities of it. Arguably, monitoring and evaluation can help a foundation to become a learning organisation. How do you learn both from successful and unsuccessful initiatives?

OR: It is within human nature that you have a certain positive bias towards your own efforts. Especially in the area of the work of foundations which per se is perceived by outsiders as “doing good”. Within this framework of doing good, it is important to not lose focus. Sometimes you might think it is enough to continue with a project because it is intended to do good. I think it is good practice or a good management philosophy to have a constant self-reflecting process and ask yourself whether you are actually reaching the goals.

AF: How do you generally think about projects? Do you have an exit strategy, where you no longer want to support a certain line of work, where you would like the government or other funders to take over? This was also the beginning of our conversation, where you mentioned the importance of sustainability. Arguably, every project or programme will inevitably come to an end. When funding stops it is not uncommon that what have been funded falls apart. How do you deal with this problem?

OR: Our funds are limited. Therefore we are always looking for ways of handing over projects at a certain stage or reallocating our funds at the moment we feel we have a new partner which can take over the project, e.g. the state or other private organisations. Of course, this is always easier said than done. This is why the cooperation between foundations is essential. You might talk about a shift in strategy, and situations where other foundations are interested in getting involved in a certain field of engagement. Then you reach an agreement and they might continue programmes in a modified way with slightly different goals. We have an exit strategy in mind the moment we start a project. This way funds can later be made available for other projects in other areas. ■

Cooperation between foundations