

Chinese checkers

International charities can play a vital role in helping extend the benefits of China's rapid development, says Ken Burnett



Beautiful scenery and bristling satellite dishes obscure underlying poverty in rural China. Photograph: Ken Burnett

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We've arrived in Leishan district, Guizhou province, southern China, a town so new no one around seems to know its name. The people we are with are amazed at the streets, squares and offices that have sprung up in the few weeks since their last visit. Standing in the middle of this place it looks like one huge construction site, a town transforming into a city as we watch. Everyone laughs, marvelling at the miracle that is China today.

It would be a dull traveller indeed whose first visit to China didn't elicit a few exclamations of "wow!" Any illusions that China is backward, dirty or difficult for the tourist or business traveller are quickly dispelled. Hotels are as good as you'll find anywhere and good value too. For commerce there are vast trading opportunities and for governments the chance to engage and influence China's progress. But my interest is the charity sector. Why might British and international charities feel they just have to be in China?

It's a question many charity supporters might ask, some anxiously. For there are cracks in

China's boom image that often get more publicity than China's successes. These include environmental problems, increasing consumption of natural resources, water pollution and shortages, endemic corruption, growing and disruptive migration from countryside to cities, drug abuse and prostitution.

Concerns about rights violations in China are increasingly reported and aspirations for freedom and justice are fragile. But similar concerns are found in many counties around the world, quite a few western countries too. Most accept that coercion and condemnation are unlikely to bear fruit, that reform and relaxation in China will more likely come through cooperation and engagement than through isolation.

For charities fighting poverty, there's an added concern. If China's economy is enjoying such a sustained boom, shouldn't it now be a donor nation rather than a recipient? With China's well-off and wealthy numbering in millions, do they really need our largesse? Are there not better places for us to direct our generosity?

International credibility

My views of China are based on just two intensive weeks there. Though I hesitate to draw conclusions from such limited experience, I was lucky to be able to see the country from a uniquely privileged perspective. I was there as part of a seven-strong international team reviewing ActionAid's programme in China, which started in 1998. My fellow reviewers came mainly from ActionAid programmes elsewhere in Asia, though one hailed from Brazil and another from Kenya. The director, management and staff of ActionAid China are all Chinese nationals with two exceptions: an impact assessment specialist from Bangladesh and a communications officer from Poland.

So why would ActionAid, Oxfam, Save the Children and similar international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) want to be in China? Particularly when there appear to be many reasons why they and their supporters might want to stay out. Or are these just instances of the development community talking concernedly about developing countries but getting very sniffy when they actually do develop?

The biggest, most obvious reason for being in China is the chance to improve the lives of the millions of poor people there. By combining their expertise and resources with local institutions and officials, international NGOs can make a difference and really help China's struggle to end poverty.

If any INGO wishes to be credible internationally it can scarcely get by without an effective and substantial presence in China. China has a massive role in international policy. Sensible INGOs can influence and advocate on a range of priority issues, including the vital area of trade. Plus, China now gobbles up huge natural resources, so if you would monitor resources worldwide, you need to be there.

China is increasingly important politically in the rest of the world, particularly Africa. Watching China's state-run version of CNN it seemed the Chinese hierarchy was daily feting a different African leader. Importantly INGOs can learn useful lessons by spreading China's experience and successes in poverty alleviation to the rest of the world.

There might soon be huge prospects for private sector fundraising in China from big donors,

corporations and even from private individuals. And from China to members of the Chinese diaspora worldwide, too.

Finally, indigenous branches of INGOs can help increase China's links with the rest of the world, particularly in Asia.

So it's not hard to see why the community of international aid agencies all have their eyes on China. What happens next will be worth watching. Our visits to rural areas showed two sides of China's struggle to overcome poverty. We met poor people who were far from miserable; who'd clearly made material progress. But my colleague from Sri Lanka, who visited different villages to me further south, reported poverty more severe than anything she's seen in India.

Shining light

The last two decades of China's growth were based on quantity. Now this needs to switch to growth based on quality. Western expertise and solidarity has a big role to play. One government official I spoke to expressed it rather well. He said: "The Chinese government is shining a torch on its development needs but there are areas of darkness. Organisations like ActionAid can help us light up some of these dark places."

Examples include working on development issues to do with women; gender; building capacity in local partner NGOs (particularly in governance and accountability); projects on migration; impact assessment; tackling HIV/Aids; emergency response and disaster relief; and researching and advocating on local, national and international issues.

But can China's social development catch up and keep up with its meteoric economic growth? Genuine opportunities for China's people to become involved in big social issues would help. Developing philanthropy and an effective civil society in China are two possibilities. Also there's much scope for encouraging corporate social responsibility (CSR), with levels of interest that would rarely be found elsewhere. One Sunday evening when I was there, four senior business people - all vice presidents or similar and each from different multinational corporations - flew from Shanghai to Beijing to have dinner with ActionAid's team, specifically to discuss CSR possibilities.

All these opportunities would speed China's social development and integration internationally. There's scope too for public involvement in social change campaigns that are compatible with government policy. If an organisation such as Greenpeace - once escorted ignominiously from Tiananmen Square and expelled from China - can return to build relationships and run a series of effective and influential campaigns there, then anything's possible.

Perhaps before long the Chinese family members of international NGOs will be raising money in China to fund aid projects not just in China but also in Africa, Latin America and other parts of Asia. Even with no fundraising infrastructure the Chinese public spontaneously donated \$86m (£45m) to help victims of the 2004 tsunami. Just imagine what might be possible, if the infrastructure were there.

• Ken Burnett is a trustee of ActionAid International and BookAid International. He writes for SocietyGuardian.co.uk in a private capacity and the views expressed here are his own. He

can be reached at www.kenburnett.com.

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