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Chengdu's Aiyouxi – creating connected communities and grassroots autonomy

Region	Asia and the Pacific
Award Scheme	Shanghai Manual
Themes	Others Youth & Livelihoods
Sustainable Development Goals	Goal 10 - Reduce inequality within and among countries Goal 11 - Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
New Urban Agenda Commitments	Sustainable Urban Development for Social Inclusion and Ending Poverty Sustainable and Inclusive Urban Prosperity and Opportunities for All

Summary

By promoting volunteerism within the local community, the Chengdu Aiyouxi Community Development Centres' Yicang Neighbourhood Mutual Assistance Programme is strengthening participatory self-governance whilst supporting vulnerable groups, creating a more socially resilient, equitable and inclusive city.

Background and Objective

The Chengdu Aiyouxi Community Development Centre is one of the top 100 social work organizations in China. The centre's associated Yicang Neighbourhood Mutual Assistance Programme is recognized on the United Nations Volunteers programme's Knowledge Portal on Volunteerism for its contribution to SDG 1: No Poverty. From 2009 to 2018, Aiyouxi has fostered 739 volunteer groups of 15,748 volunteers and encouraged 2,719 residents to become active volunteers for their neighbourhoods. Working in various fields including social relief, residents mutual assistance, volunteer organizations, community culture and environmental safety, among others, Aiyouxi is more cross-disciplinary, active and influential than regular social work organizations in China. Aiyouxi has been involved in localization of SDGs in two main aspects. Firstly, it has helped develop social resilience in vulnerable groups, and secondly it has promoted participatory self-governance at the grassroots level.

Actions and Implementation

As the founder and core representative of Aiyouxi, Liu Fei was a volunteer for many years before she established the organization. Based on the premise of the 'involvement of all', Aiyouxi focuses particularly on individuals who are in disadvantaged situations. Fei has a lot of experience initiating, organizing and leading volunteering activities. She started by promoting voluntary blood donations in 2009 working with around 300 volunteers script writing, acting, filming, editing and producing promotional videos. The group subsequently established the Aiyouxi Drama Club aimed at promoting volunteerism especially on welfare issues of blind children and children living in rural areas who were being left behind. It soon became apparent that more tangible interventions were needed working directly with individuals in challenging contexts, a vision that transformed into the social work organization, leveraging their wealth of experience in volunteering. Aiyouxi's transformation was accelerated through local government support from the Jinjiang district in Chengdu who provided free office space, training and project opportunities. The Aiyouxi Community Culture Development Centre was subsequently established in 2011. Most social work organizations in China have a close relationship with the government, acting as agents to deliver assistance and services to disadvantaged persons and communities via a top-down approach while avoiding addressing deeper questions of structural issues within society. This conventional means of social work plays the role of a service provider as opposed to social activists. Without professional constraint and because of their experience in volunteerism, Aiyouxi confronts complex social challenges via a different approach, looking for structural strategies that tackle root causes. The first community survey conducted by Aiyouxi was in the Shuijingfang sub-district in 2011. Shuijingfang is a downtown area steeped in heritage, a centre of urban renewal in Chengdu. However, there are complicated social problems hidden behind the newfound prosperous urbanization. The old, original neighbourhoods generally lacked any form of property management, and with most of the residents being older and on a low income, they gained only a little support from the government or their relatives. In general, the more disadvantaged the residents were, the less they understood how to enable and leverage mutual help within the community; and even when they did, their capabilities were very limited.



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Surrounding urban renewal then brought tenants into the old neighbourhoods, causing a disturbance to the original population structure. This in turn created friction between old and new residents, where the young and middle-aged were largely indifferent to public affairs whilst older residents typically sought to listen to the government. While these social problems were seen to be systematic and not in isolation, it was understood that monetary donations as a temporary measure would not solve the underlying structural issues. Aiyouxi did not want to facilitate one-way relations through a means of giving and receiving, but instead sought to blur the boundary between donors and recipients, building mutual assistance between them. To establish a mechanism to ensure the roles of donors and receivers were interchangeable, Aiyouxi acknowledged the importance of events and face-to-face communication to create a more tangible and impactful system – promoting the notion that community challenges must be solved within communities via mutual help amongst community members themselves. Aiyouxi introduced the Yicang Neighbourhood Mutual Assistance Programme to Chengdu, seeking to build vibrant, resilient communities with strong foundations and a culture of volunteerism. Yicang consists of four aspects: 1) the store, managed by Aiyouxi, in which each item carries an independent code so that it can be traced using tracking software and the internet; 2) donors, whom Aiyouxi refers to as ‘compassion families’ typically community opinion leaders which then extended to ordinary residents. While some people were hesitant about volunteering, Aiyouxi persuaded opinion leaders to take voluntary action first, which attracted other people to participate through a snowball effect; 3) recipients such as disadvantaged families; and 4) neighbourhood mutual assistance centres – a type of community volunteer organization overseen by Aiyouxi who are in charge of delivering supplies. To enhance resident participation and the sense of community, Aiyouxi extended Yicang to a series of sub-projects including:

- **A Spoon of Rice:** children and parents in the community are invited to contact 10 neighbours and receive a spoon of rice from each resident, to initiate the sharing of a community meal.
- **One-Audience Theatre:** community volunteers perform theatre plays – even if there is only one person in the audience. This form of entertainment reduces social isolation (particularly for those who are living alone, aging and/or disabled), helping to build bridges between them and the wider society.
- **Yicang Stop:** this operates to receive small non-cash donations including used materials, food and laundry products, and personal time, among others. Beneficiaries can subsequently become service deliverers by donating their time.
- **Charitable Market:** to balance the gap between the donations of used materials and the demand for food and washing detergent, the charitable market was opened where residents can sell used items with the proceeds donated to Yicang to help support the needs of the disadvantaged. Free health clinics, charitable performances and NGO exhibitions are also provided in the charitable market. Resource exchanges and face-to-face communication make it a very popular community occasion, and it marks a unique opportunity for the development of community volunteer organizations.
- **Charitable Lattice:** while Yicang and the charitable market can relieve difficulties in some areas, they cannot completely solve all livelihoods problems. The Charitable Lattice cooperative therefore emerged where, through the use of public space on the street, lattice shops could be built with small grants (CNY 1,000 or approximately USD 150) offered by individuals or enterprises. Donors can then become shareholders of the fund, and disadvantaged individuals can establish their own businesses or join a cooperative with a small lattice shop. Since 2013, Aiyouxi has been promoting Yicang nationwide. Currently, Yicang has extended to 32 provinces (municipalities), 98 cities, 2,600 communities, 300,000 families and 3,000 organizations, with over 5 million people having participated in related activities. Through a mix of formal and informal volunteering, and mutual assistance vulnerable and marginalized community members are encouraged to become active volunteers reducing their social isolation. This has allowed for more resilient, collective responses, highlighting the importance of participation to build confidence and empower local people and communities. Following the success of preliminary project work, Aiyouxi were invited to take part in a specialized project to promote grassroots autonomy by the local government. In the context of China’s grassroots governance, community autonomy is by law, the goal; however, in reality the administrative authority penetrates almost every aspect of daily life. Following the catastrophic earthquake on 12 May 2008, Chengdu government called for societal solidarity during post-disaster reconstruction and generated policy to boost the development of social organizations and empower self-governance at the grassroots level. To this end, Shuijingfang sub-district government assigned Aiyouxi to work actively on enhancing grassroots autonomy. Chengdu’s municipal government has attempted to construct grassroots autonomy at the neighbourhood level and institutionalize neighbourhoods through three major organizations: 1) the party group; 2) the neighbourhood management committee; and 3) the local council. However, following unsuccessful attempts in institutionalization and neighbourhood committees’ self-management, Aiyouxi recognized that the real obstruction to grassroots autonomy was the defect of social connection, i.e., that when people do not know each other, it is challenging to persuade them to work together. Aiyouxi therefore, amended the strategy to address social connection and community demands, enhancing links between residents by encouraging them to assist disadvantaged individuals and encouraging them to solve common neighbourhood issues by building acquaintances with neighbours. When residents become accustomed to solving common issues in public negotiation, self-governance is initiated. The first step Aiyouxi took to encourage public discussion was to initiate resident forums to make common issues explicit in order to help tackle issues through open discussion and collective action. To highlight this, where there were complaints about poor urban environmental quality, Aiyouxi encouraged those interested in environmental protection and who were willing to reduce waste, to build farmable gardens using common community land, as shown in figure 6. Where issues of safety arose due to illegal construction, Aiyouxi provided support in applying for the community security council to conduct a safety inspection, guided residents to discuss demolition plans and helped applications to the governmental maintenance fund. In addition, where some residents complained about a lack of public facilities, Aiyouxi identified and encouraged individuals to become active volunteer leaders and helped them implement their community improvement proposals for the public good. In combination, these actions built confidence among residents to discuss, negotiate, propose and work together on public affairs towards a common good. It also transformed the mentality. The first step Aiyouxi took to encourage public discussion was to initiate resident forums to make common issues explicit in order to help tackle issues through open discussion and collective action. To highlight this, where there were complaints about poor urban environmental quality, Aiyouxi encouraged those interested in environmental protection and who were willing to reduce waste, to build farmable gardens using common community land. Where issues of safety arose due to illegal construction, Aiyouxi provided support in applying for the community security council to conduct a safety inspection, guided residents to discuss demolition plans and helped applications to the governmental maintenance fund. In addition, where some residents



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complained about a lack of public facilities, Aiyouxi identified and encouraged individuals to become active volunteer leaders and helped them implement their community improvement proposals for the public good. In combination, these actions built confidence among residents to discuss, negotiate, propose and work together on public affairs towards a common good. It also transformed the mentality of older residents who were used to relying on governmental intervention (a lengthy process which, historically, did not lead to fast results) and instead empowered them to take matters into their own hands. It was recognized that common neighbourhood issues are not necessarily concerned with common interests, but more often a conflict of interests. To address this, Aiyouxi devised strategies to encourage mutual assistance as part of a greater collective moving away from the notion of an individualistic society. In instances where there was conflict among residents, Aiyouxi encouraged these matters to be expressed and provided rules, methods and platforms to help them negotiate and constructively address the issues. In these situations, the subsequent resident forum would not be initiated until the proposed common issues from the previous forum were solved. Via this method, residents became open to discussing public affairs and learned to balance their own interests with public interests to reach consensus through negotiation and mutual understanding – a key step for effective self-governance. To fully embed grassroots self-governance, a sense of community and identity is key. Aiyouxi initiated cultural activities to create a deeper and richer sense of community, promoting ‘action research’ to collaboratively build local knowledge with residents, covering elements such as oral history, community video and theatre, and food culture, among other topics. Art interventions such as the Lab of Artistic and Social Innovation; Fanjian – Community Public Art Festival; Community Miniature Art Museum; Community Curator Training; and the Love Museum were set up in which associated dialogic artists co-created public art with residents, playing an effective role in activating reflection among residents in regard to their own communities and strengthened community identity. In addition to stimulating diverse social groups, Aiyouxi also promoted social reconnection and reorganization. Firstly, for the grassroots level at the stage of self-governance, the need for leading community activists was evident whereby Aiyouxi’s role was to provide opportunities for community members to initiate mutual cooperation and assistance. Interest clubs and community demands simplify this process with the establishment of various groups catering for night-runs, parent-child reading and patients with ill-health within communities. These groups automatically overlap to form networks in which active members operate as individual network nodes connecting inter-group relations from which networks of mutual assistance grow and strengthen community resilience. Secondly, Aiyouxi provides certain curriculums and small grants programmes to enhance the capacity of volunteers, bolstering reputations due to their enhanced capabilities in public affairs. In accordance, volunteers naturally gain the position of central organizers and when more volunteers transition to organizers, this promotes evolution and growth within communities from preliminary phases of self-governance to more mature, autonomous and democratic forms of self-governance at the grassroots level. Based on the abovementioned progress, this allows the process of reorganization to proceed involving the development of an institutionalized hierarchy of organizations. For instance, neighbourhood organizations can be reorganized to operate as associations at the community level. And within the associations, neighbourhood organizations can negotiate the allocation of resources. Community associations with various issues can also be reorganized to form a union which cooperates and negotiates with community committees as part of a community governance process. In this way, although the nature of the community committee in China is administratively driven, it will not fall into totalitarianism as unions are generated from the bottom-up. To further deepen their work in certain communities and increase independency, Aiyouxi transformed their community work from project-oriented to site-oriented in 2019. Regarding the project-oriented modality, the quality of the project is greatly influenced by preferences and government support and policy. As for the site-oriented mode, the government is needed to provide public spaces in exchange for the community services provided by Aiyouxi for a specific time. The site-oriented mode liberates Aiyouxi from the stated contracted goals, enabling Aiyouxi to focus solely on the dynamics of communities and thus identify the actions necessary, including the introduction of community commerce to empower local communities. Where Aiyouxi defines their work as ‘developmental social work’, they accumulate experiences regarding the management of common properties so they can support community assets in a more sustainable manner (by setting up community funds for the revitalization of idle assets in public services, for example).

Conclusion

Similarly to conventional social work organizations in China, Aiyouxi facilitates service delivery; however, it uses a unique and novel approach. The extension of social work across China began in 2013, typified by the top-down delivery of services which avoided direct involvement and engagement on a personal level. Aiyouxi aims to create networks of social connections in which donors, recipients, social workers, volunteers, organizers, participants and the government all mutually benefit – what Aiyouxi terms ‘developmental social work’. This includes a number of aspects: 1) through the spirit of volunteerism, Aiyouxi attempts to manage service delivery within the community itself and enable neighbours to mutually help each other, transitioning from the reliance on external resources; 2) through the enthusiasm of volunteering and the recognition that identity serves as a driving force, Aiyouxi encourages its staff members to allow connections between service recipients to occur naturally. With their assistance, helpers and recipients are encouraged to share life stories in the form of a growing group to enhance mutual understanding, empathy and identity; 3) by understanding and accepting the nature of human selfishness, Aiyouxi creates opportunities to allow people to benefit from helping others. Under this notion of ‘helping themselves via helping others’, Aiyouxi organizes mutual helpers into various social groups which are further interlinked into a matrix of social networks. Individuals belonging to a certain group can find others through this matrix to help others or gain help from others, reducing their isolation and presenting them with the opportunity to become potential volunteers; and 4) once volunteers emerge it is essential that they are organized to maximize their potential in leading community actions. Bringing individuals together does not necessarily lead to them working together unless a certain degree of organization is managed. Through good organization, communities of mutual benefit, public welfare and commercial cooperatives are constructed step by step. When developmental social work expands to grassroots autonomy, the social connections with some degree of organization can promote social solidarity. The top-down model of administration may be more efficient for forming legitimate bodies of neighbourhood autonomy; however, these bodies tend to



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collapse quickly due to the absence of a social foundation based on organized connections. For neighbourhoods lacking self-governing habits and capabilities, it is fundamental to unfold a bottom-up procedure. The following principles are key:

- Establish neighbourhood groups based on daily life and activities including hobbies, interests, preferences, value orientation, devotion, charity or mutual assistance. By activating these neighborhood groups, potential volunteers will naturally emerge
- Initiate resident forums to allow residents to raise any issues and complaints or concerns, suggestions and wishes, and highlight the common issues which need to be solved by collective actions
- Provide methods and rules of public discussion to help residents resolve issues through their own solutions and avoid engaging in the conflicts of interest
- Provide small resource allocations and support residents to implement their solutions, and ensure they maintain practice in co-planning, co-building and co-management
- In order to gain the trust of people, do not call the next resident forum until the previous common issues are successfully resolved
- Based on the above, through commendation and training, increase the capability, recognition and appeal of active volunteers emerging from the residents. Build a network of social groups to consolidate and strengthen social resilience. Cooperate with the government to establish formal institutions of neighbourhood autonomy including local councils and neighbourhood management committees. It is a common phenomenon for participant motivation to weaken over the course of public welfare projects. To counteract this issue and to ensure pragmatism, Aiyouxu has acknowledged and adapted to this reality, encouraging resident participation in line with the principle of 'benefiting yourself from serving others'. In order to transform the roles of isolated residents into mutual helpers and active volunteers in the public domain, a transparent, open and traceable institution is necessary – in particular for urban communities where there may be little trust amongst the population. This is exemplified through Yicang in which a clear system of management, warehouse manager responsibilities and donor information is required for material warehousing. For material delivery, it contains delivery plans, material receipt publicizing, materials registration records, recipient information and real-time information on delivery. For the query and supervision of Yicang, there are regular inventory checks, real-time updates and statistical analysis whilst Yicang's management software provides traceable bar codes for each item so that donor requests for information can be promptly responded to. In addition, five databases about volunteers, donor families, recipient families, assistant enterprises and the media have been created so that all actions are open to the public. Through performing tangible actions, the public credibility that is generated from this system of transparency and openness leads to a qualitative change in the participators. Where grassroots autonomy at the neighbourhood level was proposed in Chengdu, it has revealed a certain specificity of the city on the background of commonality of China. With respect to commonality, although China has experienced the impact of modernization in the last century, paternalistic authoritarianism still remains the dominant mode of governance culture with government officials termed 'parent officials' by the public. On the other hand, the rapid development of the market economy and urbanization has increased the independence of individuals whereby they are less reliant on their families and workplaces, and more societal. As the intensity and complexity of public demand increases, it reveals the contradiction between the unlimited responsibility and the limited capacity of a paternalistic government. Considering thus, it reinforces the importance of increasing resident and social organization participation within local governance, namely participatory governance with neighbourhood autonomy. In regard to China's cities, Chengdu has developed this model most extensively and with the most depth, using the following footprints:
- From 2003 to 2008, Chengdu promoted the institution of community council, firstly in rural villages and then extending into urban communities. Grassroots empowerment and resident participation were here determined to be the key governance objectives
- From 2009 to 2012, the institution of community public finance was constructed from rural villages to urban communities. The institutions of community council and community public finance founded a base for participatory governance which facilitated organizations, regulations, activities and the financial disclosure of neighbourhood autonomy
- Since 2010, Chengdu has emphasized the policy of 'delegating power, empowerment and restoration' for community governance. Delegating power means to guarantee the capabilities and behaviours of resident self-governance; empowerment refers to guaranteeing resources that support community autonomy; and restoration relates to the normalization of sub-district governments and community committees
- Starting from 2014, Chengdu initiated the 'three socials' programme in which community committees are responsible for identifying resident needs. Based on these needs, social work organizations develop service projects and social workers deliver professional services, whilst financial support is provided by the government
- Since 2016, Chengdu has promoted a programme of community empowerment emphasizing resident subjectivity, democracy by discussion, bottom-up procedure, participation, rights-responsibility consistence, process orientation and sustainability
- Since 2018, trust governance has been in operation which requires introducing a trust system into neighbourhood management strategies using a transparent and participatory mechanism.