

# Chinese non-governmental organizations involved in HIV/AIDS prevention and control: Intra-organizational social capital as a new analytical perspective

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## Summary

HIV/AIDS is a major public health and social problem worldwide, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have played an irreplaceable role in HIV/AIDS prevention and control. At the present time, however, NGOs have not fully participated in HIV/AIDS prevention and control in China. As an emerging focus on international academic inquiry, social capital can provide a new perspective from which to promote the growth of NGOs. The Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) recommends creating regional policies tailored to multiple and varying epidemics of HIV/AIDS. In order to provide evidence to policymakers, this paper described the basic information on NGOs and their shortage of social capital. This paper also compared the actual NGOs to "government-organized non-governmental organizations" (GONGOs). Results indicated that i) Chinese NGOs working on HIV/AIDS are short of funding and core members. GONGOs received more funding, had more core members, and built more capacity building than actual NGOs; ii) Almost half of the NGOs had a low level of trust and lacked a shared vision, networks, and support. The staff of GONGOs received more support from their organization than the staff of actual NGOs. Existing intra-organizational social capital among the staff of NGOs should be increased. Capacity building and policymaking should differentiate between actual NGOs and GONGOs. The relationship between social capital and organizational performance is a topic for further study.

**Keywords:** Non-governmental organization (NGOs), intra-organizational social capital (ISC), HIV/AIDS, China

## 1. Introduction

In China, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have played an irreplaceable role in HIV/AIDS prevention and control. They act as service providers and are involved in education, service delivery, and provision of other services (1,2). There are two main types of NGOs

in China, namely, actual NGOs and "government-organized" NGOs (GONGOs). Actual NGOs are organizations created at the grassroots level and tend to be small, lack capacity, and lack political and financial resources. GONGOs are government sponsored and tend to be large, with more professional staff, and a bureaucratic structure; examples of GONGOs include the Family Planning Associations, Women's Federation, Red Cross, Youth League, trade unions, and various academic associations (3). Recognized as an important social force to promote health (4-6), NGOs have increasingly filled a positive and significant role in the response to AIDS (7-9). Specifically, their flexibility and favor among HIV/AIDS patients has made them a more accessible provider for HIV/AIDS services, and

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has helped the Chinese government meet their demands (10). Despite their active involvement, many challenges lay ahead for the future development of NGOs. HIV/AIDS-related NGOs face challenges in terms of human, financial, and technical resources (11). An absence of good relationships among members of an organization and a lack of external resources have threatened the development of NGOs and diminished their successful response to HIV/AIDS (12,13).

Understood as "features of a social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (14), social capital can be an individual or a collective asset that resides in the relationships among individuals, groups, or organizations. NGOs serve as places for the generation of social capital. Most of the studies on social capital in NGOs have focused either on the role of NGOs in fostering civic engagement (15) or on the ways that NGOs build social capital for individuals associated with the organization (16). Previous studies seldom focused on the development of organizational social capital in NGOs (17-19). Intra-organizational social capital (ISC) represents the relationships among members of the organization that can serve as a basis to improve the capacity of the organization, perform committed actions, and create value (20-22), and these relationships can be simply understood as relationships among members of an organization. Several studies have found that drawing on ISC can promote the development of an organization and they have explained the role of ISC in resource mobilization, resulting in an improved and more effective organization (20-23).

The Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) recommends creating regional policies tailored to multiple and varying epidemics of HIV/AIDS (24). HIV/AIDS-related NGOs in China need to be surveyed in order to determine what is needed to implement those policies and to provide evidence for decision-makers. This paper describes the basic information on NGOs and ISC residing in these NGOs. This paper also compares actual NGOs and GONGOS. ISC could be used to provide a brand new view and frame of reference for the study of NGOs taking part in HIV/AIDS prevention and control.

## 2. Methodology of a cross-sectional survey of Chinese NGOs involved in HIV/AIDS

*Identification and selection of the study sample.* NGOs working on HIV/AIDS were chosen based on the prevalence of HIV/AIDS and availability of resources. NGOs were selected from eight provinces in China: Hunan, Sichuan, and Yunnan were considered areas of high prevalence; Anhui, Hubei, Shandong, and Jilin were considered areas of moderate prevalence; and Gansu was considered an area of low prevalence (25). NGOs were included in the study if they were:

*i)* organizations listed as social organizations working on HIV/AIDS according to the local CDC and *ii)* the organization had been in operation for a year or longer.

*Participants in this study.* To conveniently and rapidly obtain information, core members of the organizations were surveyed. Core members would have extensive knowledge of the organization's operation and management procedures. Core members were defined as the founder, chief, or administrator of the organization or a member playing a leading role in the organization. Respondents consisted of 327 core members from 212 organizations in eight provinces. Organizations were allowed to have multiple core members participate in the survey. Ninety-one organizations had multiple members (206 members in total) participate in the survey and 121 organizations had only one member (121 members in total) participate. Responses from multiple core members of one organization were averaged to provide a single response for analysis, resulting in a total of 212 responses.

*Survey components.* The survey consisted of two parts: a questionnaire asking about basic information on the NGO and the 16-item ISC Tool. The questionnaire consisted of six questions: the organization's name, the number of years it was in operation, the number of core members, the amount of organizational funding it received in the past year, the type of organization, and the scope of its work. The ISC Tool was developed by the current authors based on previous research (26,27). ISC was defined as networks, trust, support, and a shared vision among members of an NGO. Social capital may enable people and institutions to gain access to resources like social services, volunteers, or funding. The 16-item ISC Tool consisted of four dimensions (social networks, trust, support, and a shared vision) (Table 1). Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

## 3. Organizational characteristics and social capital of HIV/AIDS-related NGOs

*Validity and reliability of the ISC Tool.* Four factors were extracted with eigenvalues above 1.0: trust (EV = 7.04), a shared vision (EV = 2.31), social networks and ties (EV = 1.30), and support (EV = 1.05). After a promax (oblique) rotation was performed, the four factors explained 73.07% of the total variance. This finding indicates that the four specific factors closely coincided with the original dimensions. The coefficient of reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) was used to evaluate internal reliability. The internal consistency had an overall Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of 0.89, and Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for the four factors ranged from 0.68 to 0.91. The ISC Tool is a valid and reliable scale to measure ISC for civil society organizations (CSOs) involved in HIV/AIDS programs in China.

**Table 1. The Intra-organizational Social Capital Tool (ISC Tool)**

Items	Disagree					Agree				
<i>Social networks and ties</i>										
1. Core members contact each other frequently in private.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
2. Core members and general staff contact each other frequently in private.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
3. General members contact each other frequently in private.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Trust</i>										
4. You believe that members of the organization will keep their promises.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
5. You believe that members of the organization are honest.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
6. You believe that the volunteers will cooperate and work effectively.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
7. You believe that the core members can lead the organization effectively.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
8. If you were busy and needed to re-allocate your work, you would be able to entrust it to your colleagues.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Support</i>										
9. The organization offers training for members.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
10. The organization provides material support when members need it.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
11. The organization provides emotional support when members need it.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Shared vision</i>										
12. The members of the organization know the meaning of HIV/AIDS-related terminology they routinely encounter.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
13. The members of the organization readily communicate.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
14. The members of the organization share a set of norms.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
15. The members of the organization approve of the way the organization operates.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
16. The members of the organization identify with the strategies and aims of the organization.	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5

*Organizational characteristics of NGOs.* A total of 327 core members from 212 organizations in 8 provinces participated in the survey (Table 2). The 212 NGOs included 134 actual NGOs (63.2%) and 78 GONGOs (36.8%). Results for the 212 NGOs indicated that the organizations had been in operation an average of 7 years (interquartile range (IQR): 5-9), organizations had an average of 4 core members (IQR: 3-5), and received an average of \$7,670 (IQR: \$3,068-\$18,408) in funding in the past year (2014). One hundred and ninety-nine NGOs (93.9%) provided educational services, 165 (77.8%) provided delivery services, 71 (33.5%) provided antiretroviral treatment, 82 (38.7%) built capacity, 129 (60.9%) provided care and support to people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA), and 175 (82.6%) implemented interventions (Table 3). There were significant differences between actual NGOs and GONGOs in the number of core members, funding, and the percentage of organizations that built capacity. Compared to actual NGOs, GONGOs had more core members, received more funding, and built more capacity.

*Amount of social capital in NGOs.* The mean component score was used as the cut-off point to divide social capital into a large amount of social capital (component score  $\geq 0$ ) and a small amount of social capital (component score  $< 0$ ) (26). Based on the cut-off points for the four dimensions of social capital, 125 NGOs (59.0%) had a high level of trust, 116 (54.7%) had a shared vision, 112 (52.8%) had extensive social networks, and 120 (56.6%) had a high level of support. Compared to actual NGOs, GONGOs had a greater amount of support from higher organizations, with a  $p$

**Table 2. HIV/AIDS-related NGOs and participants in this study**

Province	No. of NGOs (%)	No. of participants (%)
Hunan	13 (6.1)	13 (4.0)
Sichuan	28 (13.2)	61 (18.7)
Yunnan	63 (29.7)	103 (31.5)
Anhui	30 (14.2)	39 (11.9)
Hubei	13 (6.1)	22 (6.7)
Shandong	16 (7.5)	21 (6.4)
Jilin	25 (11.8)	34 (10.4)
Gansu	24 (11.3)	34 (10.4)
Overall	212 (100)	327 (100)

$\leq 0.1$ . There were no statistically significant differences between actual NGOs and GONGOs in terms of the other dimensions of social capital. The staff of GONGOs received more support from their organization than the staff of actual NGOs. In conclusion, almost half of the NGOs had a low level of trust and lacked a shared vision, networks, and support. The staff of GONGOs received more support from their organizations than the staff of actual NGOs.

#### 4. Lessons and issues for practice and development

Many NGOs form spontaneously in China (1). Of the organizations studied here, 63.2% were actual NGOs. Most actual NGOs do not have legal status while GONGOs do. Before legally registering with the Ministry of Civil Affairs, an "NGO" must obtain sponsorship from a relevant government ministry or bureau, the leader of which will be personally responsible for any misconduct by the NGO (12). Legal status as

**Table 3. Characteristics and social capital among HIV/AIDS-related NGOs (n = 212)**

Variables	Overall (n = 212)	Grass-roots (n = 134)	GONGOs (n = 78)	Z/ $\chi^2$	p value
<i>Characteristic</i>					
No. of years in operation	7 (5-9)	7 (5-9)	7 (4-9)	- 0.28	0.78
No. of core members	4 (3-5)	3 (2-5)	5 (3-6)	- 2.57	0.01
Funding (USD)	\$7,670; \$ (3,068-18, 408)	\$5,296; \$ (1,182-12,716)	\$13,389; \$ (4,862-37,773)	- 4.77	< 0.01
<i>Scope of work</i>					
Education (Yes)	199 (93.9%)	124 (92.5%)	75 (96.2%)	0.58	0.45
Service delivery (Yes)	165 (77.8%)	105 (78.4%)	60 (76.9%)	0.06	0.81
Antiviral treatment (Yes)	71 (33.5%)	45 (33.6%)	26 (33.3%)	0.00	0.97
Capacity building (Yes)	82 (38.7%)	39 (29.1%)	43 (55.1%)	14.08	< 0.01
Care and support (Yes)	129 (60.9%)	76 (56.7%)	53 (67.9%)	2.61	0.11
Interventions	175 (82.6%)	111 (82.8%)	64 (82.1%)	0.02	0.89
<i>Social capital</i>					
Trust (High)	125 (59.0%)	82 (61.2%)	43 (55.1%)	0.75	0.39
Shared vision (High)	116 (54.7%)	72 (53.7%)	44 (56.4%)	0.14	0.71
Social networks and ties (High)	112 (52.8%)	71 (53.0%)	41 (52.6%)	0.00	0.95
Support (High)	120 (56.6%)	70 (52.2%)	50 (64.1%)	2.83	0.09

an NGO is important because unregistered NGOs are typically unable to manage their own finances and bank accounts, making it difficult for them to mobilize large-scale resources (28). Over the past few years, registration restrictions for NGOs have been loosened in China (13). However, without reform of the registration process most NGOs will face difficulties functioning as professional organizations and will be unable to structurally and financially increase the scale of the services they provide (1). The current study's findings indicate that GONGOs with legal status and governmental backing are likely to have more annual funding and more core members. Unsurprisingly, more GONGOs focus on capacity building than actual NGOs. Since they are not registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs, true NGOs have difficulty applying for grants and thus often encounter financial difficulties when providing regular services, much less building capacity (12).

According to a previous study, NGOs working on HIV/AIDS receive financial support from three places: *i*) the government; *ii*) international programs; and *iii*) corporate or individual donations. A previous study in China revealed that NGOs working on HIV/AIDS had an annual budget of \$7,000 in 2009 (1). The current study found that most of the organizations studied lacked adequate funding, and the average amount of financial support received in 2014 was only about 50,000 RMB (\$7,670), so funding has not increased in five years. In June 2014, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS concluded its support for operations in China and a project entitled the "Fund for Social Organizations Participating in HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control" was established by the Chinese Government in June 2015 (2). These particular events explain why the studied NGOs had such a low annual budget in 2014. In 2014, the Chinese NGOs working on HIV/AIDS were faced with an absence of previous funds and no new

funds to replace them.

The shortage of professional social workers and public health specialists in NGOs is also an important obstacle to the development of NGOs (12). Sufficient numbers of paid, professional staff are essential to the effective long-term functioning and stability of NGOs (29). The staff of NGOs varies in composition, so the current study examined the number of core members in these NGOs instead of full-time/part-time members and volunteers. In a study by Kelly *et al.*, NGOs in Africa had an average of 5 full-time staff, those in Central/Eastern Europe & Central Asia had an average of 5, those in Latin America had an average of 5, and those in the Caribbean had an average of 2.5 (11). The current study found that NGOs only had an average of 4 core members. The current authors developed a scale to assess social capital in NGOs involved in HIV/AIDS prevention programs in China. The social capital assessed was ISC, which represents relationships based on networks, trust, support, and a shared vision among members of an NGO. Social capital may enable people and institutions to gain access to resources like social services, volunteers, or funding. ISC is one factor that influences how NGOs function and the ISC Tool is an important instrument with which to study and enhance the third sector (16). The ISC Tool had good internal consistency and construct validity. This Tool will facilitate the study of NGOs' specific strategies to build capacity to respond to the Chinese HIV/AIDS epidemic.

The current results indicated that *i*) Chinese NGOs working on HIV/AIDS are short of funding and core members. GONGOs had more core members, received more funding, and built more capacity than actual NGOs; *ii*) Almost half of the NGOs had a low level of trust and lacked a shared vision, networks, and support. The staff of GONGOs received more support

from their organization than the staff of actual NGOs. These results indicate the potential benefit of increasing the existing social capital among the staff of NGOs, perhaps by fostering relationship through joint activities or further training in teamwork for an organization's staff. Capacity building and policymaking should differentiate actual NGOs and GONGOs. NGOs have long-term, reciprocal, trust-based relationships with communities and other organizations that extend beyond the networks of their individual staff (16). Further studies are need to evaluate trust, cooperation, and reciprocity between NGOs and the government, the private sector, and media organizations and to identify deep-rooted opposition and ways to deal with it. Another topic for future study is the relationship between social capital and organizational performance.

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