**2014 Action Assembly Monitoring & Evaluation Memo**

**China Nonprofit Leadership Cohort: Building the Next Generation of Nonprofit Leaders in China**

**Implemented by Asia Catalyst**

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# Background

Asia Catalyst’s ‘Nonprofit Leadership Cohort’ (hereafter ‘the Cohort’) organized its first annual Action Assembly from July 11-13, 2014 in Bangkok, Thailand. The Action Assembly brought Cohort graduates together with the goal of fostering ongoing collaboration in the implementation of existing projects and to encourage future actions. In this safe and open space outside of mainland China, the 2014 Action Assembly provided structured opportunities for organizations to build on their advocacy plans and form advocacy coalitions. It also enabled this year’s participants (Cohort C) to meet with graduates from Cohorts A and B to share their respective experiences and “lessons learned”, and was an opportunity for targeted capacity-building support.

An evaluation was also planned in advance of the Action Assembly to further evaluate the impact of ‘The China Nonprofit Leadership Cohort’ on Cohort A and B participants (who completed the project 12 to 18 months ago). Cohort A and B participants are comprised of directors and key personnel from 19 Chinese CBOs (9 and 10 participants each Cohort). These participants met on four occasions as Cohorts to successfully complete the Asia Catalyst capacity development curriculum. The first Cohort (Cohort A) participated in the project over approximately twelve months (from December 2011 to January 2013), while the second Cohort (Cohort B) completed the curriculum within six months in 2013 (from February to July 2013).

# Approaches and methods

## Output level

Pre-set output level indicators for the 2014 Action Assembly were used in the evaluation, along with one additional output level indicator. These indicators were assessed through a desk review of project documents provided by Asia Catalyst, as well as interviews with Asia Catalyst staff. The output level indicators include:

* Number of Cohort graduates attending the Action Assembly (pre-set output level indicator)
* Number of new advocacy collaborations that continue after the Action Assembly (pre-set output level indicators)
* Number of most significant change stories documented (additional indicator)

## Outcome level

The outcome level findings and analysis included in this evaluation are based on data collected through the use of ‘The Most Significant Change’ monitoring and evaluation methodology. The Most Significant Change (MSC) methodology is a participatory monitoring and evaluation technique used to capture qualitative data on the impact of programs, originally developed by Rick Davies and Jessica Dart.[[1]](#footnote-1) The methodology involves documenting (from the point of view of project beneficiaries) the most significant change they have experienced or witnessed as a result of their involvement in a project. These changes are documented in individual narrative form, and a participatory review meeting/s is held, allowing beneficiaries and project stakeholders to select one story that represents “the most significant change” experienced or observed. Changes may be identified by participants in the lives of individuals, organizations or communities involved in projects.

One of the key strengths of the MSC methodology is that it enables rather than directs participants. With monitoring systems that use predefined indicators, the nature of the information and its meaning is largely defined from the outset. With MSC, participants are encouraged to exercise their own judgment in identifying stories and selecting stories that they value the most. MSC helps to draw out the unique perspectives and voices of beneficiaries on the value of projects they are involved in. These may differ from the benefits observed by individuals that designed the project. Compared to most other qualitative approaches, MSC places greater value on individuals, organizations and communities’ experiences and arguably provides a more vivid portrait of the project. It is an important addition to quantitative monitoring and evaluation practices, as it systematically collects outcome level data that goes beyond anecdotal evidence, and fills in many existing gaps in data that cannot be qualified using output level data. Lastly, a distinct advantage of MSC over other methodologies is its ability to capture complex, unintended outcomes.

The evaluation of the China Nonprofit Leadership Cohort project using MSC methodology began in early July 2014. The external consultant provided a one and half hour training to Cohort A and B participants, which assisted participants to document their own stories. Participants were asked to write a story responding to the question: *‘Looking back over the past one or two years, what was the most significant change that you have experienced or observed as a result of your participation in the China Nonprofit Leadership Cohort program?’* Participants were advised that the most significant change could be positive or negative, and were asked to consider how the change was brought about and what has been the effect of the change.

The MSC question was translated into colloquial Chinese language that could be clearly understood by Cohort members. To elicit detailed and vivid stories, the MSC question was divided into different components *(see Annex 3*). To carry out the evaluation ethically, respondents have all signed forms giving their consent to participate in this evaluation[[2]](#footnote-2). The informed consent form to be used in this evaluation is attached at *Annex 2.*

Following the Cohort members’ completion of their stories, Asia Catalyst staff worked with some participants to improve the clarity of some of the stories. ‘Instructions on how to effectively document the MSC interview stories’ *(see Annex 4*) have been developed to provide Asia Catalyst with assistance in working with Cohort members to effectively document stories in a consultative fashion. Throughout this process, only minor edits were made to the stories.

During the 2014 Action Assembly, separate participatory review meetings were organized with Cohort A and Cohort B. Finalized MSC stories were presented during these meetings. Cohort members were asked to present, at random, one of the completed stories. Following this, participants were asked to discuss the stories and vote for “the Most Significant Change story” – a story that they think demonstrates the most significant change that has come about in their Cohort as a result of the China Nonprofit Leadership Cohort. During this process, participants were encouraged to think deeply about the stories; openly weigh the different changes reflected in each story; express what types of changes they personally attach a high degree of importance to; and make a judgment about which story they think demonstrates the most significant change in the Cohort. Following in-depth discussions, Action Assembly participants voted for the story they think demonstrates the most significant change in the Cohort. (*The Participatory Review Meeting Agenda is attached as Annex 5. The Most Significant Change Methodology Guidelines, which provide tailored instructions on how to use the methodology, is attached as Annex 1*)

# Sampling

Evaluation of output level indicators included all 25 participants from Cohort A, B and C that attended the 2014 Action Assembly.

Evaluation of outcome level indicators using the MSC methodology aimed to include all 19 Cohort members from Cohort A and B who graduated from the project.[[3]](#footnote-3) However, two out of the 19 Cohort members could not participate in the 2014 Action Assembly evaluation process,[[4]](#footnote-4) meaning that only 17 stories were collected for evaluation of the project’s outcome. 8 respondents were from Cohort A and 9 respondents from Cohort B.

# Findings

## Output level findings

### *Cohort graduates attending the Action Assembly*

This pre-set indicator is related to the ‘total number of Cohort members attending all three days of the 2014 Action Assembly meeting’. The target was set as up to 19.

As verified by participant registration provided by Asia Catalyst and interview with Asia Catalyst staff, 17 participants attended all three days of the 2014 Action Assembly meeting, which is consistent with the predefined target. In addition, 9 members from Cohort C also attended the Action Assembly for half a day with the aim of broadening these organizations’ networks and stimulating new collaboration within the non-profit sector in China.

### *Collaborations on advocacy that continue after the Action Assembly*

This pre-set indicator is related to the ‘total number of new collaborative advocacy projects between Cohort graduates initiated during the Action Assembly meeting that last more than 6 months beyond the Action Assembly meeting. The target was set at 2.

The Action Assembly used an ‘open space’ meeting approach to encourage collaboration during the Action Assembly. Three new collaborative advocacy projects were proposed between members from Cohort A and B, which have been verified by desk review (see details below). Out of a total number of 17 organisations, three coalitions have formed to engage in new collaborative advocacy projects. Initial strategies and a plan for action were discussed and developed by these coalitions during the Action Assembly. Three organizations have proposed to be the contact point for each of the new collaborative advocacy projects.

Moreover, with the agreement of the coalitions, a bimonthly follow-up and coaching telephone meeting was also set up by Asia Catalyst to provide timely support and follow up on the three new collaborative advocacy projects’ detailed strategies and plan. Further monitoring is required by Asia Catalyst to assess this indicator, with a more detailed examination 6 months after the Action Assembly.

*New collaborative advocacy projects;*

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| 1 | Goal: Advocate for local education bureaus across six cities to implement official policy created by the Central Education Bureau in 2008 to modify current superficial ‘physical hygiene’ education to include more effective sex education for youth. This would include, but not be limited to, effective education on HIV and drug use.  Number of coalition organizations: 7  Expected date of advocacy outcome: August, 2015 |
| 2 | Goal: Advocate against the ban on commercial condom advertisements in mainstream media.  Number of coalition organizations: 5  Expected date of advocacy outcome: January 2015 |
| 3 | Goal: Advocate for increased awareness of health privacy protection by encouraging legal action against a CDC for exposing the sero-status and privacy of people living with HIV, with the aim of generating a public apology from the CDC to affected individuals.    Number of coalition organizations: 5  Expected date of advocacy outcome: June 2015 |

### *Number of most significant changes stories documented (additional indicator)*

As one of the outputs of the 2014 Action Assembly, the project received 17 most significant changes stories, which were documented by individual Cohort members prior to the Action Assembly. These stories not only provide valuable insights for this evaluation, they can also be used as a valuable resource to track Cohort members’ changes over a period of time.

## Outcome level findings

*4.2.1 The Cohort’s Most Significant Change*

Participants were asked to discuss the stories and vote for “the Most Significant Change story” – a story that they think demonstrates the most significant change that has come about as a result of the China Nonprofit Leadership Cohort. The MSC selection criteria were not decided in advance, and it was planned to emerge through a participatory discussion of the reported changes to aid Asia Catalyst’s organisational learning.

The two stories selected by Cohort A and Cohort B as showing the most significant change demonstrated how participating in the project had helped both organization’s develop the abilities and confidence needed to begin to realize their long term visions. They also reflected how both organizations had gained a sense of independence over their strategic plans and vision, instead of carrying out activities based on available project funding or the advice of leading network organizations. Cohort members (especially those in Cohort A) pointed out that having a sense of independence is a core and ‘must have principal’ for any non-profit organizations. This is despite the fact that several of the other stories presented highlighted changes in other organizational capacities, such as ‘*improved project management’, ‘better ability to achieve outcome goals’, ‘expansion of the volunteer team’, ‘better risk management’, ‘improved fundraising*’, ‘*increased team solidarity and coherence*’, etc. This seems to indicate that, while the Cohort as a whole recognizes the project has increased their organizational capacity and performance, the group places more emphasis and value on how these capacity improvements have fostered more **democratic and independent** organizations. This explicitly valued change might also have been noted by Cohort members due to the fact that these results are quite unique in China – aims to create democratic and independent organizations are rarely emphasized in other capacity development projects in China.

In addition, Cohort A’s members were unable to decide on just one most significant change story, instead voting to select two stories. The second story demonstrates how participating in the project has helped a Cohort member who had hardly any experience in advocacy to succeed in her first advocacy initiative, and brought tangible benefits to a number of people in the community. The Cohort members emphasized that **positive advocacy outcomes benefitting the community** is theultimate outcome that an organization should work for. As a Cohort member described: “this ‘external’ change is as equally valuable as an ‘internal’ organizational capacity increase”.

The above mentioned 3 MSC stories are attached to this memo (see Annex 7). MSC generates data in a similar form to ‘case studies’, which involve descriptions that are rich in context. However, unlike ‘case studies’, these MSC stories provide details on who selected the story, as well as how and why they selected one story over other stories. This helps to generate transparent descriptions of the Asia Catalyst's China Non-profit Leadership Cohort outcomes.

*4.2.2 Secondary analysis of most significant changes*

‘Most significant change stories’ selected in the project review meeting have their value in highlighting project impact and outcomes. However, the most significant change methodology does not typically provide a portrait of the ‘average’ changes. Nonetheless, secondary analysis of the other self-documented stories can provide a more comprehensive picture of the most significant impacts the project is having across Cohort members.

As mentioned above, this MSC evaluation took an open approach – leaving it up to Cohort A and B participants to identify whether the most significant change was experienced or observed on either the individual, organizational or community level. These MSC stories provide key insights into the impact the program is having on Cohort organizations. As demonstrated in Chart 1, 65% of the most significant changes story (11 out of 17) described significant changes at organizational level, which expresses that Cohort members have mastered one or more academically grounded best practices, concepts and skill introduced from the project, which as a result have significantly strengthened their organization’s capacity. (Detailed qualitative data is discussed in following sections).

Furthermore, 35% of the most significant changes stories (6 out of 17) described significant changes at community level. These stories expressed how the project has enabled the organization to use skills and knowledge, such as strategic analysis, democratic governance principles, or sound organizational management practices, to increase the effectiveness of their health rights advocacy. The data suggests the Asia Catalyst's China Non-profit Leadership Cohort program bridged management and advocacy skills that increased the effectiveness of the rights-based health advocacy carried out by China’s non-profit sector. These advocacy efforts demonstrated significant positive impacts on a range of stigmatized and marginalized community members. (Detailed qualitative data is discussed in following sections).

The above findings suggest that Cohort members placed a greater value on the positive changes the project has brought to their organization and community. Moreover, although most stories portrayed significant changes in individual abilities, the fact that none of the stories focussed on these changes indicates that the Asia Catalyst China Non-profit Leadership Cohort Project has transferred knowledge from individual Cohort members to their organizations. Two sections below (4.3 and 4.4) include detailed analysis of the causal relationship between the project and the most significant change experienced by Cohort member organisations. The sections also include story excerpts illustrating the project’s impact on participants’ organisations. These qualitative data suggest that the Asia Catalyst China Non-profit Leadership Cohort has assisted in the development of more robust organizations. It further appears that Asia Catalyst's China Non-profit Leadership Cohort has made a contribution to increasing the professionalization of China’s non-profit sector.

**Chart 1: Most Significant Changes as identified by Cohorts A and B**

## Qualitative data on change at the organizational level

11 most significant changes stories described the most significant changes as being in Cohort members’ organizations. 6 stories attributed their most significant change to the systematic study of the full Asia Catalyst curriculum, 4 organizations specifically pointed out how their organization’s significant change was a direct result from mastering the core skill of “strategic planning”, and 1 organization attributed their most significant change to skills gained in “establishing and managing organizational structure”. Select excerpts from Cohort members MSC stories[[5]](#footnote-5) are included below to provide a more vivid portrait of changes experienced by Cohort members’ organizations and the project impact. The data also provides some insight into the causal relationship between the project and the change.

## Story excerpts on change at the organizational level

*4.4.1 Change due to systematic study of the project curriculum*

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| *“This is a standout training. Compared to other trainings, it has helped me to grow the quickest. It has been effective because it is specifically tailored for the organizational needs of Chinese grassroots NGOs. […] In just six short months, the Asia Catalyst training has helped us to completely revise our whole work approach and allowed us to focus on developing a strategic plan, divide work responsibilities, assign individual strategic objectives and fully develop work roles and responsibilities. [...] The Asia Catalyst training has helped our organization to develop standard operating procedures. The new work approach is like ‘computer software’ – having the right ‘software’ has allowed us to work more effectively. [...] Because of [this change], our organization has attracted more attention and support from business; we have not only started new projects, but also worked to make our existing projects more sustainable and attracted the favourable attention of high-level government officials. We’ve also received the support of the Chinese Children and Youth Foundation and established a special fund. I must recognize that before the Asia Catalyst training, I was lost. I couldn’t manage the ‘Double Ribbon Working Group’, even before all of our expansion. I almost gave up! None of this would have been possible without Asia Catalyst’s support.” ( B9)* |

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| *“From the time our organization was established in 2008 until 2013, our organization’s work focused on providing support to people living with HIV. However, we didn’t have any experience in advocacy. We also hadn’t completed a strategic plan, resource mobilization plan or volunteer management system, and overall, our management was quite chaotic. Like most other small Chinese NGOs in the sector, we wanted to support people living with HIV, but didn’t dare to -- and in fact didn’t know how to -- launch an advocacy campaign. In 2013, after participating in Asia Catalyst’s training program, we were able to increase our organization’s capacity. We then turned our attention to advocacy work. Asia Catalyst’s support has greatly helped to build our project staff’s awareness of advocacy, and helped our organization to become more influential in the community. We discovered that focusing on advocacy could help us to address some very fundamental problems. [….] This change in focus is a very significant strategic change. It has helped us to change the way we think about what we are trying to achieve and has led to a fundamental change in how we approach our work.” (B15)* |

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| *“From 2006 to 2010, whenever people in the community raised a problem, we would try to fix it. But this was a very ad-hoc approach that wasn’t strategic at all. Meetings that we had were quite chaotic and didn’t achieve a great deal. Our organization also wasn’t registered, and the local government wasn’t willing to support us, so we were on the brink of collapse. […] Through participating in the Asia Catalyst training program, we learned the skills to change our strategic plan, which gave everyone a lot more clarity about the direction we were heading as an organization and what their particular roles were. At the same time, we were able to change our approach to communicating with government and change their perception of us. We also placed greater emphasis on collaboration and discovered the benefits of working with local and international organizations, including a better understanding of treatment. In fact, this collaboration allowed us to sometimes be better informed than local doctors, which meant that they began to see us in a new light. Eventually, the County Hospital’s Director of HIV Treatment and Prevention came to serve as a consultant for our organization. We also successfully advocated for the local government to improve its implementation of national-level health policies, which has gradually helped to meet the needs of the local community. We helped to address some of the financial vulnerabilities experienced by people living with HIV: successfully campaigning for local people living with HIV to be provided with housing subsidies (a one-off payment of 3,000-5,000 RMB), and social welfare payments of 305 RMB per month (up from 125 RMB per month). […] Through these achievements, we earned the trust of the local community. […] These achievements have also helped to make our organization’s mission more sustainable.” (B13)* |

*4.4.2 Change due to mastering the core skill of strategic planning*

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| *“This strategic plan gave me and our staff a clear idea of what we wanted to do, and helped give us a sense of independence – distinct from donors. Now we carry out a lot of activities, some of which might not be expected by specific donors, but are important stepping stones for the realization of our long term vision. We won’t apply for funding for just any project; we are only interested in funding that matches our strategic plan and vision. […] I’ve come across a lot of NGOs (at least 20) and the majority seem to be far less strategic in what they do, and are not really sure which direction they are going in. By contrast, I think our strategic plan has become our guide. Without it, we’d be lost.”(A2)* |

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| *“Our strategic plan is our organization’s binoculars. [...] Strategic direction is really the most important element. If your technical skills are lacking the project might be a bit slow, but if you don’t have strategic direction you could end up in the completely wrong direction. A strategy can help an organization to navigate and prevent it from taking wrong turns. Through the Asia Catalyst program, we were able to clarify our organization’s mission and work out our strategic plan. We were also able to change our previous practice of always relying on our organization’s founder to make all decisions. [...] This has also helped a great deal to promote organizational cohesiveness and allowed our volunteers to better understand what we want to do. [...] These changes have helped us to recruit more than 200 parents as program volunteers over the last two years, and utilize this volunteer network to provide even more extensive services.” (B6)* |

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| *“Formulating a strategic plan was not particularly difficult; what was difficult was making sense of what we were doing previously and achieving consensus among our team members. This process led to great changes to our team members’ thinking and working style. [...] Previously our work was quite chaotic and inefficient, with no thought of the future. [...] As a result of having a strategic plan, we are also able to improve our evaluation, keep everyone focused, and improve the organization’s efficiency and cohesiveness.” (A1)* |

### *4.4.3 Change due to establishing and managing the organization’s structure*

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| *“When the organization began, we didn’t have a clear structure, and the division of our work wasn’t clear. [...] Most things fell to one key person to manage.  Changing these practices and working culture was a great challenge. […] After participating in the Asia Catalyst program, especially the sessions on managing the organization’s structure, we discovered that relying on one key person was not helpful in the long-term, and would not allow our organization to get stronger. As a result, we started to make significant changes to our approach [...] and work out how everyone can use their individual skills and abilities to improve the organization’s efficiency and capabilities. [...] We’ve moved from a model of “everyone does everything together” to allowing people to develop areas of expertise. As a result, we’ve seen tangible improvement in a range of areas, including staff development and organisational effectiveness.”（A3）* |

## Qualitative data on change at the community level

As mentioned above, 6 most significant changes stories identified their significant changes at community level. Stories linked these changes to their organization’s use of strategic analysis, democratic governance principles, and sound organizational management practices introduced during the Non-profit Leadership Cohort training. These practices have increased the effectiveness of these Cohort members’ rights based health advocacy, which in turn has helped to create tangible benefits for a range of communities. Listed below are selected excerpts from a range of MSC stories that provide a more vivid portrait of the impact of advocacy on different marginalised and stigmatized communities.

*4.5.1 Story excerpts on change at the community level*

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| *“With the support of Asia Catalyst’s small grants program, the staff of the Henan Women’s Network have been able to increase their advocacy skills and self-confidence. Through our advocacy, the Zhengzhou City Number 6 Hospital has responded to our calls to cancel the 1134 RMB fee charged for “doctors’ protection” when people living with HIV have surgery, and agreed to further adjust other fees for fairness, [...] Every year there are more than 2000 people living with HIV that have surgery […]. This advocacy not only reduced people living with HIV’s medical burden, but has also given us confidence that we can achieve the change we want to see if we are reasonable and persistent.” (A4)* |

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| *“In 2012, there were more than a 100 non-local students who lacked local household registration living with HIV in Guangzhou province. [...] Among these students, one third should be taking standard antiretroviral drugs on a routine basis, but do not because they don't have money to pay for the check-up and treatment fee once they start taking ARVs. Lacking household registration […] they do not receive the same access to treatment as locals and need to bear much of these costs themselves. Through participating in the Asia Catalyst Program, I learnt a lot about organizational management and advocacy. These were subjects that I knew almost nothing about before – especially advocacy. These trainings allowed me to better understand the strategies and risks of advocacy, how to build alliances, and we began to take steps to work out how advocacy could benefit the lives of non-local students. We also applied for Asia Catalyst’s small grants advocacy project, which gave us the opportunity to put our knowledge into practice and strive to reduce the financial barriers to HIV treatment and care that non-local students faced. […] At the beginning of the year [2014], our advocacy paid off. […] During a coordination meeting between the Guangdong Centre for Disease Control, local hospitals and community CBOs, a policy change was issued. This policy change allowed non-local students to receive the same allowances as locals – 7,200 RMB per year for outpatient HIV treatment, and 7,000 RMB per year for in-patient care. Since they launched this new policy, we haven’t heard of any cases of non-local students delaying their ARV treatment. […] This advocacy success has made me realize that as a non-profit organization with direct contact to the community, we need to try and find patterns of issues. Finding resources to conduct advocacy for policy change will be more effective than trying to resolve individual issues over and over again, this is more effective, because we’ll be able to create permanent change that will benefit the whole community.” (A8)* |

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| *“In 2013, the Global Fund and other major donors withdrew from China [...] However, NGOs from Heilongjiang province have found that the funding that has followed has not been enough to sustain our work. Through Asia Catalyst training, I have learnt some useful advocacy techniques. [...] We have used these techniques when advocating to the local Centre for Disease Control (CDC). We first used these techniques to advocate for funding from the provincial level CDC for our own organization to continue our work. [...] Afterwards, we used this approach as a model, and coordinated with NGOs from 8 other cities to successfully lobby city level CDCs to also sustainably fund other organizations providing important services throughout the province. From January 2014 until now, this funding has allowed us to provide health check services to 1500 men-who-have-sex-with-men (MSM) in Harbin city. Hundreds of MSM in other cities have also been tested (by other NGOs because of this advocacy).” (A7)* |

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| *“Receiving Asia Catalyst’s advocacy grant has enabled us to advocate for a reduction in the price of Hepatitis B medication. The treatment of people living with Hepatitis B is a long-term process that can cover a person’s entire lifetime. The cost of treatment is a huge burden for people living with Hepatitis B, which can sometimes cause people to skip or even stop their treatment. With Asia Catalyst’s support, we’ve been able to advocate for pharmacies in Chengdu to adjust the prices of Hepatitis B medication. [...] Since we began, the price of medication has dropped 12.1%. [...] We’ve also worked to expose illegal pricing of medication and held government department’s to account to ensure they are fulfilling their legal administrative and oversight obligations. The Asia Catalyst grant has brought about a significant change for the community and new beginnings. We hope it provides a basis and example for similar work throughout the country.” (A12)* |

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| *“When we first started the organization, we didn’t have any funding, and we were only able to pass on basic HIV knowledge we had learned in trainings we had attended. After finding out that the national ‘4 Free 1 Care’  policy had been helping people living with HIV in other places, while our area had nothing, we decided to try to find out more about it. But we didn’t know where to go – our first conversations with the local Health Bureau were fruitless. We didn’t have a way to get in touch with anyone with decision-making authority to talk about the difficulties experienced by people living with HIV. [...] The [Asia Catalyst] training we attended helped us to organize our efforts -- we learnt advocacy skills and techniques and how to work to build alliances to achieve our objectives. Through our advocacy efforts, the Hebei Provincial Government released a document called ‘Number 7 Guidelines’. This document guaranteed that people who had contracted HIV in Langfang city (as a result of blood donation) as well as the next of kin of people who had already passed away from AIDS receive a one-off payment of 70,000 RMB, as well as 800 RMB per month to pay for treatment, 300 RMB per month in social welfare, and access to the minimum wage for the whole household. These payments have helped to relieve the economic stresses on the families of people living with HIV.” (B11)* |

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| *“Through attending the Asia Catalyst training I was able to learn a great deal, including about advocacy and risk management. [...] Previously, a number of foreign donors had visited our organization, but did not find us to be a suitable partner. We had also unsuccessfully applied for funding for advocacy programs before. [...] However, the Asia Catalyst training gave us the skills, especially in advocacy risk management, to work together with other local NGOs to successfully fundraise for a program (the Xishuangbanna Dai People’s Rural Law Program), which we have recently begun in July 2014. This program will teach Dai farmers in Xishuangbanna about the law, and will be a platform for us to promote other advocacy initiatives in rural areas.” (B16)* |

These MSC stories show the views of Cohort members on the value of Asia Catalyst's China Non-profit Leadership Cohort. They also offer clear thoughts on the direction the Asia Catalyst's China Non-profit Leadership Cohort is going and the impact and outcome the projects have had in the words of its beneficiaries. These impacts and the direction of the project echo the goals stated in the China Nonprofit Leadership Cohort Project proposal to the Ford Foundation, especially goal 2, which commits to ‘***increase the effectiveness of advocacy by health rights NGOs’.***

## Secondary analysis of all changes

Very often ‘the most significant change’ in a given story is closely interlinked with other changes that have come about as a result of participation in a project. In this evaluation, the Cohort members’ self-documented MSC stories have described these other interlinked changes, while stating the most significant change. Although these changes were not identified as the most significant, there is still value in examining the number of times a specific type of change is noted in the full set of collected MSC stories to gather data on the frequency of different changes. This analysis (see Chart 2) provides more insight on how different aspects of the project bring about changes valued by Cohort members. It should be noted that MSC often tends to favour success stories rather than ‘bad news’. However, this can still help to encourage project improvements, and encourage Asia Catalyst staff to keep building on project components that are explicitly valued.

Of the MSC stories, 14 mentioned that ‘*strategic planning capacity’* increase was critical to bring about significant changes. 9 stories specifically pointed out that an increase in their ‘advocacy capacity’ was key, while 5 stories noted increases in fundraising capacity. In addition, *‘training and coaching capacity’, ‘volunteer management’*, ‘risk management’ and *‘capacity in establishing and managing organisational structure using the core value of meaningful**participation’* were acknowledged by 4, 3, 2,and 1 stories respectively.

**Chart 2: Capacity increases noted in all MSC stories**

It is worth noting that the Cohort members from 4 organisations who stated increases in ***‘training and coaching capacity’*** also expressed their capability in using *Asia* Catalyst’s curriculum to conduct management and advocacy training for other NGOs.

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| *“The program has been a very valuable experience. From the beginning until the end, I’ve worked to prepare the sessions, organize the material, carry out training ‘test-runs’, facilitate, take notes, coach participants and review their homework. It’s been a lot of work but has come with great rewards. It’s been a rigorous process, and I’ve particularly valued learning how to lead students to come up with their own ideas rather than just ‘teach’ them.”* |

Moreover, one organization that did not receive a grant from Asia Catalyst has already taken the initiative to put their training skills into practice and now routinely provides locally owned capacity development trainings to a range of audiences.

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| *“Every year our organization conducts more than 20 community training workshops. We build the capacity of a range of participants including people from media, lawyers, and community members with very different backgrounds. We’ve used the topics we’ve learned about [in the Asia Catalyst Cohort], including strategic planning and advocacy, as an important part of the capacity building training we provide to other organizations. We will continue to emphasize to our collaborating partners that planning is the foundation of advocacy campaigns.”* |

These changes are in line with goal 1 of the China Nonprofit Leadership Cohort Project proposal submitted to the Ford Foundation, which is ‘***To create sustainable, Chinese-driven NGO management skills and advocacy training initiatives for health rights NGOs based on Asia Catalyst’s curriculum’.***

In addition to the capacity increases discussed above, Chart 3 provides a comprehensive view of other project outcomes noted in stories. These outcomes include: ‘increased effectiveness of rights based health advocacy’ (9 cases), ‘established new collaboration within the non-profit sector in China’ (7 cases), and ‘increased self-confidence’ (2 cases).

**Chart 3: Other changes noted in all MSC stories**

## Adverse outcomes

There are two stories that mentioned adverse outcomes. These stories reported that Cohort members had been visited by (or closely monitored by) either local or national public security officials as result of their participation in the program. This is demonstrated in the following quote:

*“We have had close attention by the local Public Security Bureau because of our involvement in the project. Security officials have come to our organization many times to ask about our relationship with Asia Catalyst. Luckily, we did not overreact and it has not brought us much trouble.”*

Neither of the organizations that have reported this adverse outcome have had negative impacts on their personal safety or on their organization. Although Asia Catalyst has foreseen this risk and developed contingency plans, this finding confirms that these risks will require continued attention and risk management.

# Recommendations to improve the use of the MSC methodology for future evaluation

## Use external interviewers to collect stories

Asking project beneficiaries to self-document stories is a legitimate way of implementing the MSC methodology. However, in an ideal situation, interviews will be conducted, and stories will be written by people who have not been directly involved in the project. Based on experiences with this evaluation, this approach is suggested for the following reasons:

* A few self-documented MSC stories lack sufficient detail. Providing detail on ‘how the change is attributed to the Asia Catalyst Cohort’ helps to more directly show how the change was caused by the project. Getting more data on ‘what impact the change has had is also useful to answer the ‘so what’ question. People who tell MSC stories often assume that other people reading their stories will have background knowledge. By using an external interviewer without background knowledge of the project and their organization, Cohort members will be encouraged to provide more details. This not only helps clarify stories, but also makes them more credible.
* It appears that some of the participants tended to choose stories that have a better flow, logic and details. This might disadvantage stories where the change or causal relational was not clearly spelled out due to lesser communication skills or writing capacity. By using external interviewers with similar academic backgrounds, this risk is reduced.
* Although detailed instruction and training was provided to Cohort members, stories still came back with very different formats and level of details. This imposed challenges on the data analysis process.

For future application, Asia Catalyst might consider using graduate students with some experience in conducting interviews to perform this task. Interviewers could use the MSC questions that have been developed in the semi-structured interview with Cohort member.

Interviews will usually last approximately 45 minutes if one question is being asked. Interviewers need to be trained to encourage respondents to tell their stories, and avoid asking leading questions or offering suggested answers. It is useful if interviewers run 2-3 practice interviews with people not participating in the project to enable them to avoid these common errors, and are provided with constructive feedback to improve their interview skills before they interview any Cohort members.

During the interview, it is important to ask the respondents about the project activities they have been involved in. This helps to ensure that respondents are clear about the project under review. If respondents don’t know which activities they have been involved in, or are unsure, they can be reminded. In addition, eliciting detailed stories can sometimes be difficult, for detail techniques, please refer to the techniques described in the Annex 1 MSC guideline-step 3 ‘Work with Cohort members to document their story’.

Shortly after interviews have taken place, interviewers should record details of the interview. Ideally, interviews will be recorded (if informed consent is provided). Interviewers should avoid diverting their attention away from the respondent by taking excessive notes. Maintaining eye contact and a conversational rapport with respondents is the best approach. Details should be recorded in a first person story form of approximately 1-2 A4 pages. Efforts should be made to retain the “voice” of the interviewee as much as possible in each “Most Significant Change story” and clearly describe the most significant change the interviewee has experienced or observed. This should include factual information that makes it clear who was involved, what happened, where, and when. Interviewers should be aware that other changes are often mentioned throughout the interview, and it is often the case that the most significant change is closely interlinked with other changes resulting from participation in the project. Interviewers should do their best to describe these other, interlinked changes, while clearly stating the most significant change. Interviewers must carefully examine respondents’ informed consent form before completing the story, and ensure pseudonyms are used unless real-name permission has been given.

## Allow sufficient time to improve the quality of the story

Regardless of whether an interviewer or Cohort member documents the MSC story, it is suggested that at least one week is allowed for an evaluator or Asia Catalyst staff to finalize the draft MSC story submitted by the interviewers or Cohort member. As mentioned above, clearer, more detailed stories are more credible.

## Invite other stakeholders to the MSC sharing and review meeting

The MSC participatory review meeting process could also be carried out with other valued project stakeholders, such as donors, who can also be included in the whole discussion and voting process. This may be beneficial, as often the project management staff do not have a definitive insight on the precise reasons why a project proposal was agreed to by a donor. In other words, there is often a lack of insight into which components of the proposed project were in line with the donor’s core interest and triggered the donor’s funding decision. One of the most important advantages of including the donor in the MSC process is that, during their participation, the project can gain key insights into the specific changes created by the project that donors most value. Understanding the values of donors, as well as other stakeholders, such as local officials, would help recipient organizations to develop more effective future communication and use business development opportunities that target different stakeholder’s specific interests.

Moreover, MSC sharing and review meetings in which participants share in each other’s achievements and discuss the project’s impact on their organization or community can also serve as an effective publicity platform. By inviting other stakeholders to the review and sharing meeting, the project gains a valuable opportunity to communicate and disseminate the project impact in a more natural, transparent and vivid format, which carries more weight than a written document that busy stakeholders may or may not have the time to read in detail. It is especially useful to invite stakeholders from whom the project hopes to gain a greater level of buy-in.

However, meeting organisers should disclose the full list of external stakeholders that they wish to invite to all beneficiaries before sending the invitations to external stakeholders. Open and closed consultation to obtain each and every beneficiaries permission is a prerequisite for the attendance of any of the stakeholders. The project should not invite stakeholders that any beneficiaries express concern about.

With beneficiaries’ permission, inviting a reasonable number of stakeholder would not in general affect the discussion and outcome of the meeting. However, during discussions, the key focus should still be on the project’s value to beneficiaries. Therefore, direct beneficiaries should always be invited to express their view and opinions before any of the other stakeholders.

The group can use MSC to examine the impact of their advocacy outcome

It is quite remarkable that the Cohort has had so many cases of tangible advocacy outcomes. If Asia Catalyst or Cohort member organizations wish to examine advocacy outcomes in a specific community, the evaluation could use the MSC method with a range of relevant stakeholders, including ordinary members of the community that might be benefiting from an advocacy result. If appropriate, it may be useful to seek the perspectives of relevant officials who have been engaged with Cohort members.

# Limitations of this evaluation

Although MSC is a very useful approach, it does not always give a clear picture of the extent of change. Additionally, the project’s impact on organizations may be uneven – if both significant and limited changes are reported, the overall outcomes may become difficult to interpret. MSC is therefore best used in combination with other quantitative studies. For quantitative information on the extent of changes, a great deal of data is provided in an external evaluation of the China Non-profit Leadership Cohort carried out in December 2013.

**Annexes**

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| Annex 1 | The Most Significant Change Methodology Guide |
| Annex 2 | Informed Consent (ENG) |
| Annex 2.1 | Informed Consent (CHN) |
| Annex 3 | Guide for Cohort Member to Document Their MSC story (ENG) |
| Annex 3.1 | Guide for Cohort A Members to Document Their MSC Story (CHN） |
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| Annex 4 | Instructions on how to effectively document the MSC interview stories |
| Annex 5 | Participatory Cohort Groups MSC Sharing and Review Meeting Agenda |
| Annex 6 | M&E framework for the Action Assembly |
| Annex 7 | Selected Most Significant Change (MSC) Stories by Cohort A and B |

**Annex 7**

**Most Significant Change (MSC) Stories on Management Skills and Rights-based Advocacy**

**Capacity Building for Grassroots Health Rights NGOs in China**

***Voices of CBO Partner Organizations***

**The Importance of Strategic Planning (1st MSC story chosen by Cohort A)**

Our organization was founded in 2008 by a group of female sex workers. After working together for more than a year we still didn’t have any funding. At that time, three of the organization’s founding members left Tianjin because of changes in their work and family circumstances. In 2010, with only myself and Li Meng remaining to work on the project, we hired another friend to moonlight as our accountant. Because we hadn’t carried out NGO work before, at first we just wanted to improve the safety of our fellow sex worker sisters and prevent them from getting HIV by encouraging their clients to use condoms, and so this is what our first project focused on.

By 2012, we had three full time staff, but still did not have much idea of how NGOs worked. We certainly hadn’t figured out how to write a strategic plan. By doing outreach in the sex worker community, we realized that our sisters didn’t only have health risks to contend with; they were also at risk of violence, robbery and kidnapping and these risk would be intensified if they work as low-paid sex worker. We realized that these problems wouldn’t change unless there were also changes in the legal environment and reduction in social stigma, but didn’t know what to do. We thought we should just go out and try to meet output level indicators set by our donors, and didn’t think of ourselves of an independent organization.

After attending the Asia Catalyst [China Nonprofit Leadership Cohort] training, I began to understand what advocacy was, as well as what strategic planning was. Afterwards, we invited some technical experts and women from our community to work together to develop a strategic plan, and set our vision and goals for the future. This strategic plan gave me and our staff a clear idea of what we wanted to do, and helped gave us a sense of independence -- distinct from donors. Now we carry out a lot of activities, some of which might not be expected by specific donors, but are important stepping stones for the realization of our long term vision. We won’t apply for funding for just any project, we are only interested in funding that matches our strategic plan and vision.

I’ve come across a lot of NGOs (at least 20) and the majority seem to be far less strategic in what they do, and are not really sure about which director they are going.

By contrast, I believe that our strategic plan is the guide for everything our organization does. Without the strategic plan, we would be like a lonely boat, floating on the open sea without direction.

**Advocacy in Guangzhou: Campaigning to reduce the financial vulnerability of non-local students living with HIV (2nd MSC story chosen by Cohort A)**

In 2012, there were more than a 100 non-local students who lacked local household registration living with HIV in Guangzhou province. This represented a 50% increase over 2011 levels. Among these students, one third should be taking standard antiretroviral drugs on a routine basis, but do not because they don't have money to pay for the checkup and treatment fee once they start taking ARVs. Lacking household registration, which determines access to the city’s healthcare system, means that non-local students, even those who have lived in Guangzhou for many years, do not receive the same access to treatment as locals and need to bear much of these costs themselves. We have had more than 20 students come to us saying that they desperate to find between 800 and 20,000 RMB to make up what they needed to pay for their health checks or treatment.

The challenges are particularly great for students living with HIV who experience other illnesses. I remember clearly one student calling me on his 18th birthday and telling me that he had just found out that he had another sexually transmitted infection (STI), which would cost more than 7,000 RMB to treat. He was worried that he wouldn’t be able to find the money for treatment, and that the STI would further weaken his immune system and expose him to other illnesses. Not treating the STI on time put him at risk of needing an operation, which would put him in an even more financial vulnerable situation.

I also remember another student coming to me and happily telling me that he was finally able to pick up anti-retroviral (ARV) medication once every three months. He was happy because previously when he was first put on ARV, he had to go to the hospital on a regular basis for expensive checkups. This had cost him between 2,000 and 3,000 RMB in the previous six months. Afraid to tell his family, he had saved up for almost a year to begin his ARV treatment. However, this delay in treatment had caused his immune system to reach dangerously low levels and nearly missed the best time to treat his HIV infection. These encounters made me realize that these weren’t isolated cases, and that there were probably a large group of non-local students suffering the same kinds of problems and not knowing what to do.

Through participating in the Asia Catalyst Cohort, I learnt a lot about organizational management and advocacy. These were subjects that I knew almost nothing about before – especially advocacy. These trainings allowed me to better understand the strategies and risks of advocacy, how to build alliances, and we began to take steps to work out how advocacy could benefit the lives of non-local students. We also applied for Asia Catalyst’s small grants advocacy project, which gave us the opportunity to put our knowledge into practice and strive to reduce the financial barriers to HIV treatment and care that non-local students faced.

We began by reaching out to the Guangzhou Centre for Disease Control and the local STI and AIDS Association to be our alliance partners, and carried out detailed on-the-ground research on the struggles that non-local students living with HIV were facing. We were very open with the students, explaining that our research was intended to improve the living conditions of teenagers like them who were living with HIV and address the practical, financial problems they were facing. Although it was a challenge, in the end more than half the students we reached out to agree to participate in our research.

This data gave us motivation and confidence. We had lots of opportunities to talk about our findings at a range of different seminars, conferences and other fora. We even had the opportunity to present on this topic at the provincial government’s Guangdong HIV Conference. We were the only NGO invited to speak, and found the provincial government officials very responsive to our explanations – they wrote a memo on the spot instructing health department’s to pay greater attention to the growing spread of HIV in teenagers.

On World AIDS Day [2013], our alliance partners and we received interviews from a wide range of local media sources. We talked about the growing rates of HIV among teens and the problems they experienced in attracting treatment. This is the first time this issue was paid wide attention by the public and government departments throughout the province. In this supportive environment, we also sat down with our partners to discuss a clear plan of action to generate policy change. We realized that without a clear plan, it would be very difficult to achieve our goals.

At the beginning of the year, our advocacy paid off. During a coordination meeting between the Guangdong Centre for Disease Control, local hospitals and community CBOs, a policy change was issued. This policy change allowed non-local students to receive the same allowances as locals – 7,200 RMB per year for outpatient HIV treatment, and 7,000 RMB per year for in-patient care. Since they launched this new policy, we haven’t heard of any cases of non-local students delaying their ARV treatment.

We are still working with our partners to fight for non-local students’ rights to basic health care. We hope that in the future subsidized STI and ARV treatment will not only be available to people with CD4 counts lower than 500 who are receiving ARV treatment, and that the cost of treatment is no longer an obstacle for any people living with HIV, regardless of whether they have formally begun ARV treatment or not .

This advocacy success has made me realize as a nonprofit organization with direct contact to the community, we need to try and find patterns of issues. Finding resources to conduct advocacy for policy change will be more effective than trying to resolve individual issues over and over again, this is more effective, because we’ll be able to create permanent change that will benefit the whole community.

**Courage • Change (MSC story chosen by Cohort B)**

I am Li Yingjie, the manager of the food and drug safety program for Zhengzhou Yirenping, an NGO from the Central Plains region of China. Zhengzhou Yirenping is a policy advocacy organization concerned with health rights. From February to August of 2013, I participated in Asia Catalyst’s Nonprofit Leadership Cohort B, and soon after participated in Cohort C as an assistant trainer. In the past year and a half, I have participated in two training series [with Asia Catalyst], and I truly believe that the effects of this training have caused a great change in myself, as well as in the organization. For me, the change comprised a better understanding of the situation of other groups, an awareness of the importance of the English language, the start of my daily study of English and an increase in my learning of technical skills. But the most significant change has been in the organization I manage.

For me, I have experienced a great increase in courage. To tell the truth, I am by nature an introvert and become nervous in crowded situations; I dread addressing large groups of people. This problem was not apparent when I entered the public sphere because most of my work was paperwork, but as I worked longer, the domain of my work expanded. I often had to attend conferences as a guest speaker and presenter, and when this began, my problem became apparent. My problem caused serious complications and severely affected my work performance. After I became an assistant trainer, I had no choice but to force myself to stand in front of the class and do things such as lead discussions and introduce course material, but this was entirely of my own choosing. Before I signed up to be an assistant trainer, I had a brief moment of struggle – I was conflicted about whether or not to register as I was worried that I might fail. Nevertheless, I ultimately decided to challenge myself. I registered and forced myself to stand in front of a class. The results of this decision have been very good. On the one hand, I have become interested in training as a profession and have learned a few basic skills and techniques. Even more importantly, I have gradually become capable of addressing other participants at conferences – something that once made me very nervous. I am extremely thankful to Asia Catalyst for this experience as a training assistant, and the opportunity it gave me to develop. If there is another Cohort, I suggest that participants eagerly sign up to be training assistants.

However, the most significant change brought by this project has been in how the organization has increased its focus on strategic planning and established contacts for funding. Our organization is a part of a larger Zhengzhou Yirenping network, and previously our organization mainly played a role in implementing activities based on the instructions of the network’s central leadership. We had previously overlooked tasks such as drafting project plans and fundraising, to the extent that since I started working I had not previously received any strategic planning training. After I started learning from the Asia Catalyst Cohort curriculum, I would go back to the office and share with all of my colleagues what I had learned. I introduced the concept of a strategic plan’s logic model and explained how to deal with donors. My colleagues were all very interested in this information – they constantly suggested that we should try to independently conduct an analysis of strategic planning as well as apply for projects in our own name, without depending on our network organization. Of course, at that time, this was all just talk. However, thanks to a progressive restructure within the Yirenping community, our office had the chance to conduct our own strategic plan and fundraising. Naturally, the content of training played a role in our work: we began discussing and drafting the strategic plan and fundraising strategies, a process that still has relevance to our organization to this day. We are still using the skills learned in the training to conduct our work.

1. For detailed information about the methodology, see: Davies, R. and J. Dart (2005) *The ‘Most Significant Change’ (MSC) Technique; A Guide to Its Use* (www.mande.co.uk/docs/MSCGuide.pdf). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Qualitative data included in this memo are all in respect of the different degree of consent Cohort member gave [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. However, Cohort C was not included in the impact level evaluation since they had not completed the project at the time the evaluation started. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. One participant was unable to attend for personal reasons, while another was prevented from attending by local government security restrictions. As a result, their MSC stories were not collected. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The quotations presented in this section are all selected from the Cohort members’ self-documented Most Significant Change stories. The author would like to thank the Cohort members who participated in the evaluation that contributed to understanding the impact of the project. This evaluation would not have been possible without the generous sharing of their experiences and insights [↑](#footnote-ref-5)