

China Program Summary

The International Republican Institute (IRI) began working in China in 1993. For nearly 18 years, IRI has supported the efforts of Chinese reformers in the government, academic, and nonprofit sectors to promote electoral reform, good governance, the rule of law and the development of an open and vibrant civil society.

Together with Chinese partners, IRI works to develop positive change in China, while increasing mutual understanding and cooperation between China and the United States. IRI's projects currently focus on four thematic areas: civil society strengthening, rights awareness and education, governance and political participation, and public policy influence. As China continues to undergo rapid economic development, civil society groups are emerging in greater numbers to advocate for communities and constituencies whose interests are not prioritized in the governmental decision-making processes. IRI supports those individuals and institutions in China who are working to expand the dialogue for reform at both the grassroots and national levels.

Civil Society

The pace of civil society development in China has been remarkable. Today, in China, there are hundreds of thousands of groups that identify themselves as nongovernmental organizations or community-based groups working on a multitude of societal, economic and political issues. IRI has expanded its work with some of these civil society groups to strengthen their ability to work with their constituencies as they become leaders on issues related to China's political and social development.

IRI's capacity-building trainings and support for small civil society organizations have enhanced their ability to help members of some of China's most vulnerable groups, including ethnic minorities, rural women, those living with HIV/AIDS and migrant workers.

Rights Awareness and Education

Citizens' awareness of their rights is a fundamental element of any civil society. Citizens who are aware of their rights as afforded by law are better able to secure those rights, and are better able to constructively engage with government to advocate for improvements or reforms in those laws as they become necessary.

IRI supports Chinese organizations that work to educate some of China's most marginalized groups. A recent initiative focuses on promoting and protecting women's rights through a network of correspondents who report on rights violations and gather data on larger trends affecting women in the workplace, family, and society. IRI also supports legal awareness training for communities in Qinghai Province, where IRI's partner works together with local Justice Ministry officials to help those communities understand the full scope of their rights and the types of legal recourse available to them.

Governance and Political Participation

In 1994, IRI became the first western organization permitted to observe Chinese village elections. Since then, IRI has observed close to 60 elections in provinces throughout the country. Although there is wide variation in the quality of grassroots elections, in provinces where IRI observed multiple rounds of elections, significant improvements were observed over time.

However, in recent years, IRI's work in elections has slowed and the focus has shifted to other areas. Since 2001, IRI has supported projects to increase the number of politically-active women who are running for office and taking on leadership roles at the village level. Training has highlighted such issues as improving communication skills,

gaining the trust of voters, building networks of supporters, election campaigning, as well as political and civic participation. Local governance, in the form of budget reform at the township level, has become one of IRI's most promising projects. In addition to governance skills, IRI has also worked with specialists in think tanks and policy institutes to analyze local government functions and make recommendations to improve governance.

Public Policy Influence

A critical role of civil society is the ability to influence government beyond elections. Through direct interaction, the publication of articles or reports, the mass media, and other methods, a well-organized civil society enables citizens' voices to be heard, or speaks for those who are unable. Equally important, a vigorous civil society can help government to become more efficient and accountable in its actions.

A number of IRI partners seek to influence public policy through websites, journals, newspapers, and person to person contact. IRI supports a broad range of projects: from support to organizations to ensure transparent decision making and allocation of funds for HIV/AIDS; to the yearly publication of articles discussing the state of China's grassroots reforms; to the analysis of research regarding China's political prisoners and mass incidents.

