Strengthening Institutions for Worker Empowerment: Capacity Building among Civil Society Organizations in China
At Verité, we are committed to ensuring that people worldwide work under safe, fair, and legal conditions. In over 60 countries around the world, we work with governments, corporations, investors, factories, civil society organizations, and workers to make systemic changes in the workplace. Verité’s model of engagement is to identify opportunities to strengthen policies and practices that support human rights and labor standards and to develop practical and sustainable solutions through training and education for all stakeholders.

Verité Works profiles Verité’s initiatives to improve workplace conditions around the world. Each of three issues per year offers an in-depth look at a particular effort on the ground, including successes, challenges, and reflections for future work. Verité Works aims to contribute to the ongoing discussion around best practices and approaches for ensuring that people worldwide work under safe, fair, and legal conditions.

Strengthening Institutions for Worker Empowerment: Capacity Building among Civil Society Organizations in China

An integral part of Verité’s approach to improving working conditions worldwide is collaboration and partnership with local institutions in assessing workplaces; training workers, managers, and other stakeholders; and conducting in-depth research. Local civil society organizations (CSOs) are critical to imbuing labor assessments and programs with a nuanced and accurate understanding of local conditions. CSOs are critical also to ensuring that workers will have locally oriented, independent voices supporting and advocating for their interests over the long term.

In this inaugural issue of Verité Works, we profile a two-year program of capacity building among CSOs in China – a country in which NGOs in particular are few, and the challenges for CSOs to engage on labor issues are many. The goal of this program was to increase the capacity of Chinese civil society to improve working conditions by enhancing understanding of labor standards and corporate social responsibility (CSR) among workers, NGOs, and other CSOs. The program equipped CSOs at the regional and grassroots levels with the capacity to train and support workers, and to promote labor standards and CSR in the workplace. The project entailed notable new partnerships with provincial universities, enabling them to train and support workers and the CSO community. Verité’s work in this regard is ongoing, and recently expanded to include training for students at provincial- and vocational-level academic institutions.

Verité promotes labor standards and corporate social responsibility in the workplace through vocational training.

In this report, the term “civil society organizations” is meant to encompass all not-for-profit entities in China, including but not limited to NGOs, academic institutions, community centers, social service groups and industrial associations.
The Need

Working conditions in China fall far short of international standards.

Verité’s field-level perspective, based on over 1,000 social audits, confirms that significant workplace violations remain resistant to improvement. Among these persistent problems, which have been largely untouched by the widespread introduction of corporate Codes of Conduct, are:

- obstacles to the empowerment of workers and legal restrictions on their ability to associate freely;
- widespread violations of working hour standards and laws, resulting in excessive overtime and endemic underpayment of workers’ wages – by a minimum of 15%;
- non-payment of benefits, including social security and health coverage, among others.

These problems persist despite the accordance of Chinese labor law with international standards in most areas. Two systemic weaknesses undermine the effectiveness of Chinese law: first, a lack of practical understanding and institutional capacity; second, a lack of sufficient impetus among Chinese government and private sector institutions.

NGOs – an essential force for holding government accountable in most nations – are growing in number in China, but are underrepresented in the areas of workplace development, labor standards, and CSR. Existing labor-oriented NGOs are hampered by limited capacity to deliver the types of programs that Verité has identified as critical to sustaining systemic improvements in protections for labor standards. Engagement on labor issues by other types of CSOs is also limited.

Guangdong Province has been the focus of activity in support of Chinese workers, including social auditing, factory and worker training, research, and CSO advocacy. This is in large measure due to Guangdong’s centrality to manufacturing for export, as well as its proximity to Hong Kong. Numerous Hong Kong-based CSOs work on labor conditions in Guangdong. Even in Guangdong, however, such efforts are outmatched by the scale of the problems.

Nor has the capacity of CSOs to address labor issues kept pace with the expansion of manufacturing to coastal regions north of Guangdong, as well as to central and inland provinces. For example, approximately 40 percent of Verité’s factory audits now take place outside of Guangdong, in places where there are few resources to address labor rights issues and little domestic or international attention.

See Piece by Piece: How the Overtime Pay of Piece-Rate Workers in China is Falling Short, Verité Issue Brief, June 2006.

One clear problematic area of disagreement between Chinese law and accepted international standards is the practical prohibition on independent trade unions.
Helping CSOs fill the gap and engage effectively on workplace conditions, labor standards, and CSR is a delicate and complicated undertaking in China.

Verité faced two primary challenges in implementing its program. The first was the general operating environment, in which openness to activity by CSOs on these issues is fledgling. The second was ensuring sustainability of project impacts, given that NGOs, in particular, have difficulty finding long-term sources of support, and are subject to pressure from governmental agencies and businesses.

Verité embraced local realities in addressing these two challenges.

First, we sought to leverage the priority placed on better labor law enforcement by government agencies as well as the official trade union, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU). Also, Code of Conduct monitoring is very common in China. Verité therefore oriented its capacity building to help strengthen “social compliance” (as it is known in the auditing industry) and providing more resources for workers to address workplace issues. Verité’s expertise in training others to conduct social compliance monitoring and remediation – an effort that we have implemented in dozens of countries around the world – thus provided a foundation on which to broaden the involvement of labor-oriented CSOs in China.

This focus on social compliance standards and monitoring has the added benefit of helping provide ways to sustain Chinese CSOs, as future monitoring and remediation training for export manufacturers could be a possible source of revenue.

As a second step toward ensuring long-term sustainability, Verité pursued a tiered approach to program design, developing primary partnerships with two large, well-established CSOs and working jointly with those primary partners to conduct trainings for other, smaller CSOs and for workers. Verité infused local autonomy into the character and direction of the capacity building at the outset, involving the primary partners in training design, content development, and recruitment of trainees. The primary partners were then equipped to continue training and support for workers and other CSOs beyond the life of the project.

Additionally, Verité acted on a broad definition of the CSO community, orienting its training programs to the full range of civil society actors. In this way the program responded to the specific nature of and constraints on Chinese civil society organizations, and in particular the important role played by academic institutions; rather than utilizing a potentially more narrow, western articulation of the role and nature of civil society.

This wide-angle approach furthermore recognized the variety of ways in which CSOs in various sectors can engage on issues of labor standards and CSR. For example, Verité provided training to a volunteer youth organization in Anhui Province that works with rural children whose parents have migrated to urban centers for work. Training was also provided to industrial associations in Jiangsu Province that set standards for industry and provide guidance on best practices.

Geographically, Verité initiated institution-building efforts in three different provinces: Guangdong Province, where Verité has been active for almost ten years and where the bulk of worker-focused labor rights research and advocacy conducted by Chinese NGOs is currently conducted; and Anhui and Jiangsu, two provinces with increasing export-market production where Verité has worked for several years and in which CSO interest and engagement on labor issues is nascent.

Verité acted on a broad definition of the CSO community, orienting its training programs to the full range of civil society actors.
The Program

Anhui and Jiangsu

Upon assessment of the landscape of CSOs in Anhui and Jiangsu, Verité identified provincial universities as the most promising choice for primary partners. There were several reasons for this decision: there were no well-established labor-oriented CSOs with which to partner; and provincial universities offered stable operations and large reservoirs of human capital, with both faculty and graduate students as potential sources of support for workers and budding NGOs. The university furthermore occupies a unique place in China as a relatively open venue for experimentation and critical thought, thus allowing for the possibility of engaging meaningfully and directly with issues of labor standards and rights, as well as on other elements of CSR. Verité recognized the added benefit of raising understanding of the importance of CSR and labor standards among a population of students, some of whom will likely go on to hold places of influence over policy or business in China.

In early 2007, Verité established memoranda of understanding with Anhui Agricultural University’s School of Humanities and Social Sciences and Suzhou University’s Institute of Southern Jiangsu Development.

Verité then conducted intensive train-the-trainer workshops with a wide variety of university representatives, including faculty and graduate students majoring in sociology, social work, law, and business. The purpose of these workshops was twofold:

• to equip participants with the knowledge and skills necessary to co-lead, with Verité, a series of follow-on trainings for smaller CSOs and for workers; and

• to train them on the principles of social auditing.

Verité’s train-the-trainer workshops introduced participants to the history and trends of CSR, NGOs, Codes of Conduct, and common workplace issues in Chinese supplier factories, and provided a platform of knowledge on social auditing principles, processes, and practical tools. To help bridge the gap between academic and workplace cultures, the concepts of Adult Learning Principles and Experiential Learning Cycles were introduced, and participants worked together to develop sample training modules.

Faculty and graduate students from Anhui Agricultural University (AAU) and Suzhou University (SU) then collaborated with Verité in delivering capacity-building training for over 50 people hailing from a broad spectrum of CSOs in their respective provinces. In Anhui, representatives from NGOs, universities, and academic associations attended the workshop; with NGO representatives working on a broad range of issues including labor, environment, and protection of disadvantaged populations. In Jiangsu, attendees hailed from industry associations, universities, and community service centers. AAU and SU were active partners in reaching out to CSOs in their own provinces, establishing new relationships and facilitating diverse participation at the trainings.

These workshops were ambitious in scope, touching on all major issues with relevance to labor conditions in China. Participants were offered:

• an introduction to the concept of CSR and its history globally and in China;

• a primer on international labor standards, Codes of Conduct, and major laws and regulations on occupational health and safety;

• an overview of social auditing principles, processes, and tools, including worker interview techniques;

• an analysis of the new Labor Contract Law and its impact on labor relations;

• a discussion of challenges and strategies for Chinese CSOs in engaging on labor issues; and

• discussions to identify next steps.

This broad agenda aimed to provide a platform from which each attending CSO could identify and explore one or more topic areas as possible entry points for further engagement on labor issues.

Following the workshops co-facilitated with Verité, AAU organized two forums on its own that addressed the roles that academic institutions and CSOs can effectively take to promote CSR in Anhui Province. Participants included representatives from several local social science research associations and business organizations.

Verité supported the delivery of trainings on labor standards and CSR to over 1,200 workers and 115 CSO representatives.
Feedback from workshop participants was generally positive and encouraging. In developing next steps for their own organizations, participants indicated an interest in engaging on a more sustained basis with the issues covered in the training. Sample comments are offered below.

Accompanying the workshops for CSOs was an effort to seed capacity within AAU and SU to train workers directly on core concepts of labor standards and CSR. Verité supported the two universities to create curricula for worker training that they then delivered on their own. In Anhui, 18 sessions were conducted by AAU faculty and graduate students for 310 workers in two factories. At the request of one participating factory, the Anhui training team brought in members of the school’s Physics Department to develop a set of workplace exercises, recorded on a DVD and distributed throughout the factory, to prevent injuries due to repetitive stress and other occupational hazards. In Jiangsu, SU faculty and graduate students created eight courses and delivered 24 workshops to 972 workers in three factories. Workers demonstrated a high degree of interest during the trainings, taking notes and asking questions. University trainers commented that feedback from the workers reinforced for them the importance and value of such programs.

As a direct result of this project, faculty members of both AAU and SU wrote and published studies, theses, and research reports on CSR and developing civil society in China. For example, SU Professor Feng Gao wrote “Civil Society and NGOs in China: History and Current Status,” a paper providing an academic perspective on advancing CSR in China.

Sample Evaluations from Workshop Participants

- “This workshop was very helpful in teaching us more about migrant workers, and we will develop more worker oriented programs to meet their needs.”
  - CSO workshop participant

- “This training increased my knowledge on Labor Contract Law, and I will apply what I have learned in my future work.”
- “This workshop was very helpful in teaching us more about migrant workers, and we will develop more worker oriented programs to meet their needs.”
- “The training provided us with systematic knowledge on CSR and it also increased our interests in conducting factory worker training.”
- “Our awareness on occupational health and safety had been raised and we will pay more attention to this aspect in the future to reduce work-related injury.”
- “This workshop provided us with new perspectives, methods, and skills in promoting CSR in China, which were very enlightening for us.”
- “This workshop increased our overall understanding on CSR, and it also raised our capacity to analyze labor issues. We will introduce these concepts to more workers in our future work.”
- “As a staff person working in a community service center, I will introduce what I have learned in this workshop to community members to let more parties know about these concepts and knowledge.”
- “After this training, I will introduce knowledge on the Labor Contract Law and the concept of civil society to our community members.”
- “I have benefited a lot from this workshop, and it gave us a new perspective on thinking about our organization’s future strategy.”
Guangdong

Verité pursued a similar tiered design in Guangdong Province, with the added objective to support the development of a network of labor-oriented NGOs. Verité again chose universities as primary partners, but in this case primarily to administer a set of worker training workshops. Verité’s own headquarters in China is located in Shenzhen; thus Verité itself was well-positioned to lead the capacity building for CSOs in the province.

Verité established partnerships with the Department of Social Work at Guangdong University of Business Studies (GUBS) and the Legal Clinic of the Law School at Sun Yat-Sen University (SYSU) in 2006. A similar orientation workshop to the one offered at AAU and SU was conducted.

The purpose of partnering with two major provincial universities in Guangdong Province was to capitalize on their various strengths, with faculty and students from GUBS developing interactive modules for workers on the prevention of work-related injury; and SYSU faculty and students focusing on modules for workers on issues of labor law and civil liberties.

Faculty and students from GUBS delivered 33 trainings to over 1,500 workers in 18 factories. Twenty-six workshops were delivered by SYSU faculty and students to 1,200 workers in 19 factories.

In preparing to launch training for CSOs in Guangdong, Verité met with an environment in which existing labor NGOs, in particular, are facing significant difficulties in their legal existence and operations. The struggle to survive and negotiate political, operational, and financial barriers is formidable. Based on these realities, Verité opted to collaborate with GUBS in offering the first training in Guangzhou. Representatives from local NGOs and other CSOs were invited to attend the orientation workshops offered for GUBS students on-site at the university. This partnership with GUBS in delivery of the training served to allay concerns about political sensitivity and lend an independent character to the capacity building effort.

Later in 2007, Verité’s China office held another workshop in Shenzhen for local labor-oriented CSOs; and hosted a grassroots NGO network forum in Shenzhen.

The forum was targeted especially for NGOs, as opposed to all CSOs, in recognition of the unique operating challenges confronted by NGOs in China, and in order to promote networking among them. Attendees were mainly labor-focused, with operations in Guangdong, Beijing, and Shandong. The forum introduced western NGO practices in network building, and facilitated discussion of the challenges that Chinese NGOs face in networking and ways to overcome them.

Core Worker Training Modules

- CSR, Labor Law and Common Code of Conduct Issues
- Occupational Health and Safety (Shop Floor and Dorms)
- Workplace Injury Prevention
- Occupational Disease Prevention
- Grievance, Harassment, and Discipline
Conclusions and Reflections for Future Work

The outcomes of Verité’s engagement with academic institutions in building capacity among civil society organizations in China have been positive. Administrations, faculty, and graduate students of the four university partners have all demonstrated a commitment to pursuing issues of labor standards and CSR in China. For example:

- Both AAU and SU have expressed their intention to offer CSR and NGO management classes at their schools.

- Several faculty and graduate students at both universities have already written studies, theses, and research reports on CSR and developing civil society in China, and similar work is forthcoming.

- Professor Huang Banghan of AAU delivered a talk at Verité’s 2007 China symposium on “Approaches for the Local Academic Society to Promote CSR in China” in which he noted that the adoption and promotion of socially responsible practices among enterprises, government, academic institutions, NGOs, and other CSOs is integral to healthy and balanced economic development. Professor Huang articulated several logical areas of engagement for academic institutions, including training and research on CSR principles, and support for activities of grassroots NGOs in the CSR arena. He also noted that more engagement by all civil society actors – as well as local government and factory management – to promote CSR in China is needed.

In collaborating with academic institutions in China, Verité has found them to be uniquely well-placed to engage on issues of labor standards and CSR. First, they have significant flexibility in engaging on important social issues. Second, the leadership and faculty have taken a proactive approach to developing capacity on issues of CSR and the improvement of working conditions in China, recognizing these areas as critical to China’s successful economic and social development.

Verité has also found the university to be a logical and effective place for discussing and critiquing issues of labor policy in China: as a relatively small, foreign NGO, Verité’s direct interactions with government officials in China are limited and circumscribed. Yet academicians often study and comment on China’s labor policy, and they also function as public opinion leaders on these issues. Cultivation of an understanding and interest in issues of CSR and working conditions among academic institutions in China seems, therefore, essential.

This recognition of the vital role played by academic institutions within civil society does not take away, however, from the continuing and significant need to support in a direct way the development of NGOs, labor-oriented or otherwise. Thus in order to ensure healthy and equitable development in China, an awareness of and capacity to engage on labor issues among non-academic civil society institutions is critical. In Verité’s view, program interventions almost always lead to more robust outcomes when a variety of stakeholders, with different perspectives and opportunities to influence labor conditions at different levels, are involved. It is Verité’s hope that engagement with a variety of actors at different levels of civil society in China will yield rich results for adherence to labor standards and CSR principles.

Verité is continuing this capacity-building work through a new three-year integrated program that includes training for Chinese NGOs to conduct labor assessments; the creation of capacity, and the delivery of training for students at provincial and vocational-level academic institutions; and the facilitation of a CSR Practitioners’ Network to reinforce international standards. Updates on this program will be forthcoming in future issues of Verité Works.