

# ***Chinese Social Organizations' Participation in Epidemic Prevention and Control: Actions, Issues, and Countermeasures***

**Song Yifan<sup>1,a,\*</sup>**

*<sup>1</sup>Macao Polytechnic University, Gomes Street, Macao, China  
a. 17839296166@163.com*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** In theory, as a significant force in social governance, social organizations play a crucial role in responding to major emergencies. Through practical observation, it can be seen that in the prevention and control of the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese social organizations actively participated, primarily responsible for coordinating epidemic prevention materials, providing professional services, serving as volunteers, and actively engaging in publicity. Compared to the government, they possess advantages and characteristics such as resource advantages, coordination advantages, professional advantages, and public welfare advantages, playing a role that the government and businesses may not fully exploit. While acknowledging their strengths, it is also necessary to admit that Chinese social organizations face various challenges in their participation in pandemic prevention and control, such as insufficient participation, lack of independence, and limited credibility. These issues can be analyzed from three dimensions: the internal aspects of social organizations themselves, the relationship between social organizations and the government, and legal regulations. To better harness the role of social organizations in responding to public crises, it is essential to make improvements in the following three areas: 1. Accelerate organizational capacity building to enhance social organizations' ability to respond to emergencies. 2. Streamline the relationship between the government and social organizations to achieve complementary strengths. 3. Enhance legal regulations. It is hoped that these measures can contribute to improving the governance capacity of social organizations in effectively participating in public crisis events.

**Keywords:** social organizations, epidemic prevention and control, public crisis, social governance

## **1. Introduction**

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic broke out globally, severely affecting people's daily lives and production, threatening the safety of people's lives and property. Observations of the reality show that, in addition to active government involvement in epidemic prevention and control, social organizations also played an indispensable role. Social organizations demonstrated flexibility and efficiency in the epidemic prevention and control process, effectively filling the governance gap left by the government. At this stage, China has achieved a comprehensive victory over the epidemic, a

success that is inextricably linked to the efforts of social organizations. However, in practice, social organizations face many challenges in their epidemic prevention and control efforts, with many pressing issues that need to be addressed, limiting their ability to participate in public crisis governance. The reasons behind these challenges and potential solutions warrant in-depth study. Therefore, the main focus of this paper revolves around the dilemmas faced by Chinese social organizations in participating in epidemic prevention and control. The research significance of this paper is twofold: theoretically, it delves into the legal reasoning and models of Chinese social organizations participating in public crisis governance. Practically, with the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, the paper analyzes the issues faced by social organizations during their involvement in epidemic prevention and control, and proposes optimization strategies, aiming to enhance the ability of social organizations in responding to public crises. This paper comprises three main parts: The first part takes the practice of social organizations participating in epidemic prevention and control as the research subject, focusing on the forms and fields of Chinese social organizations' involvement, their relationships with the government, and their strengths; The second part dissects the problems encountered by Chinese social organizations during their participation in epidemic prevention and control, and identifies the root causes; The third part, based on the challenges faced by social organizations and their reasons, offers suggestions to promote the effective participation of social organizations in public crisis events.

## **2. Actions of Chinese Social Organizations in Epidemic Prevention and Control**

### **2.1. Forms and Fields of Chinese Social Organizations' Participation in Epidemic Prevention and Control**

#### **2.1.1. Actively Coordinating Epidemic Prevention Supplies**

After the outbreak of the severe epidemic, there was a nationwide shortage of epidemic prevention materials. Social organizations played a pivotal role in actively coordinating these supplies. Charitable organizations rely on their principles and philosophies of public welfare, volunteerism, compassion, and charity to inspire society, influence communities, and mobilize resources. They have the ability to promptly compensate for government resource shortages, thereby improving the effectiveness of fundraising and distribution of pandemic-related funds and materials. The mobilization effect is significant. [1] In addition to traditional charitable organizations and channels like the Red Cross that collect funds and materials, an increasing number of foundations also began to raise epidemic prevention supplies. Characteristics of social organizations raising epidemic prevention materials during the epidemic are: firstly, the full application of the "Internet+" model, with the majority of donations being made online, and secondly, a high degree of transparency and openness.

#### **2.1.2. Providing Professional Social Services**

Services offered by social organizations spanned areas like psychological counseling, services for women and children, and social aid. For instance, cultural and artistic social organizations produced a series of positive works, fostering a proactive anti-epidemic atmosphere. Organizations specializing in psychological counseling actively launched hotlines, scientifically guiding the public's mental well-being. Social work organizations, meanwhile, focused on vulnerable groups affected by the epidemic, offering specialized services. For example, the Chinese Health Management Association, in response to the prevalent psychological issues among the public, has collaborated with relevant enterprises and social organizations to establish the "Micro Health Psychological Care" service

platform. Together with mental health experts, they have launched the “Compassion Hotline” through the internet, offering psychological counseling services [2].

### **2.1.3. Organizing Volunteers**

In response to the sudden major epidemic, government bodies and relevant social institutions could not allocate sufficient manpower, leading to a massive demand for volunteer services. On January 28, 2021, central authorities and the China Voluntary Service Federation issued a call, urging volunteers and volunteer organizations to participate in epidemic prevention. Over 2,300 volunteer institutions and social organizations in Beijing responded actively, engaging extensively in epidemic prevention. According to statistics from the Beijing Social Organization Management Center, just at the city level, over 200,000 volunteer service activities were conducted.

### **2.1.4. Promoting Epidemic Prevention Knowledge**

After achieving a phased victory in epidemic prevention and control, social organizations proactively promoted and disseminated common knowledge about epidemic prevention, spreading accurate preventive information. At the same time, they actively urged the public to get vaccinated and clarified negative public opinions. After the successful development of the COVID-19 vaccine, some negative information began to spread, such as concerns that the vaccine might affect physical and mental health, or that the vaccine was not yet mature enough. In response, social organizations made considerable efforts in both online and offline channels. Firstly, they promptly debunked false claims on platforms like Weibo and actively promoted the benefits of the vaccine. Secondly, they delved deep into communities, providing residents with detailed information about the vaccination process and patiently answering their questions. They encouraged the general public to actively participate in vaccination, emphasizing it as a civic duty and responsibility to completely overcome the epidemic.

## **2.2. Relationship with the Government During Epidemic Prevention and Control**

The relationship between the government and social organizations is a dynamic one characterized by bidirectional interaction, orderly cooperation, and mutual integration. This relationship manifests itself during the development process of social organizations, transitioning from a state of external separation and mutual checks and balances to a cohesive, cooperative, and integrative relationship [3]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, various governmental departments issued numerous documents to support and guide social organizations in participating in pandemic prevention and control. For instance, there were clear directives to include social organizations in the support scope to combat the impacts of the pneumonia outbreak, alleviating the impact on these organizations through tax reductions and exemptions. Although the government takes the leading role, social organizations are not passive. The government relies on these organizations to fulfill its functions. During the COVID-19 outbreak, social organizations, leveraging their inherent advantages, stepped in where the government fell short, leading to a comprehensive victory against the virus. Social organizations have a broad-based popular nature and serve as bridges and links between the Party, the government, and the public. Their interactions with the public help highlight the efforts the government has made in fighting the pandemic, which in turn helps enhance the government’s social recognition and solidify its legitimacy among the people. The relationship between the government and social organizations should be one of partnership under the leadership of the government, with both parties playing to their strengths while collaborating and coordinating with each other. By harnessing the combined forces of governmental functions and social organizations, the goals of social governance can be achieved.

## **2.3. Advantages of Chinese Social Organizations in Epidemic Prevention and Control**

### **2.3.1. Resource Advantage**

Social organizations have a pronounced philanthropic and widespread nature, enabling them to promptly mobilize surrounding resources during crises. This ensures a rapid concentration of human, financial, and material resources, effectively compensating for the government's shortfalls in resource supply. On January 23, 2020, the city of Wuhan announced a lockdown, followed shortly by lockdown measures in other parts of Hubei Province. In the early stages of the lockdown, locally stored supplies were insufficient to meet local demands. Social organizations played a crucial role in collecting resources and providing organizational guidance.

### **2.3.2. Professional Advantage**

Social organizations gather advantageous resources and specialized talent within the industry, providing high-level professional services during the COVID-19 pandemic, paying particular attention to marginalized groups in epidemic prevention efforts. For example, the Guang'an City Psychological Association formed a team of 68 psychological relief volunteers and established a remote psychological counseling hotline to alleviate the public's tension and anxiety [4].

### **2.3.3. Coordination Advantage**

Mature social organizations possess strong mobilization capabilities and extensive societal foundations. They played a pivotal role in coordination during the COVID-19 outbreak, integrating top-quality domestic and international resources in the shortest time possible and swiftly delivering these resources to the groups in need [5]. Organizations like the Blue Sky Rescue were quickly deployed, taking charge of tasks such as disinfection, temperature recording, and material transportation. They not only collaborated with the government in epidemic prevention efforts but also served complementary functions.

### **2.3.4. Philanthropy**

Social organizations generally exist for the public good. They participated in pandemic prevention and control without calculating gains or losses, unleashing immense energy. Additionally, the spirit of dedication displayed by these organizations during the pandemic inspired a sense of philanthropy among the general public. This led to a wave of donations, both monetary and in-kind, boosting the nation's determination to fight against the pandemic.

## **3. The Dilemmas and Causes of Chinese Social Organizations Participating in Epidemic Prevention and Control**

### **3.1. Issues in the Participation of Social Organizations in Epidemic Prevention and Control**

#### **3.1.1. Insufficient Participation by Social Organizations**

The lack of professional capacity in social organizations has become a critical factor hindering their effective involvement in epidemic prevention and control. Firstly, due to the uniqueness of the epidemic, volunteers are required to possess specific medical knowledge and procedural standards. Some volunteers, however, began working without proper training, resulting in subpar outcomes because of their insufficient specialization. Secondly, the response speed of social organizations in joining the epidemic prevention and control is slow. Although the state released some documents,

such as the “Guidelines for Volunteer Organizations and Volunteers to Participate in Epidemic Prevention and Control” issued on March 17, 2020, few organizations have been able to promptly send supplies to the hardest-hit areas. Lastly, there’s a lack of initiative in participation by social organizations. The degree of involvement can be broadly classified into non-participation, symbolic participation, and full participation [6]. The vast majority remain at the symbolic participation stage, where they participate involuntarily or passively. Full participation, where organizations actively join in, leveraging their strengths and specialization, is the ideal state. Thus, the critical challenge for these organizations is to transition from symbolic to full participation.

### **3.1.2. Lack of Independence in Social Organizations**

According to resource dependency theory, there exists an asymmetrical dependency relationship between the government and social organizations. This makes it challenging for social organizations to act autonomously and proactively during epidemic prevention and control. On the one hand, social organizations are administratively dependent on the government. Without substantial power, they cannot make effective decisions based on real-time situations and primarily follow government policies and recommendations. From this perspective, the relationship resembles that between the brain (government) and limbs (social organizations); one thinks, the other executes. On the other hand, there’s financial dependency on the government, with many social organizations relying heavily on fiscal appropriations. Funds for epidemic control activities require government approval, and even when approved, the delay can reduce the effectiveness of prevention and control measures.

### **3.1.3. Lack of Public Trust in Social Organizations**

Social organizations need public support to mobilize resources for epidemic control. Due to insufficient official support and endorsement, the public often lacks trust in their actions. This lack of trust impedes their operations. Additionally, issues such as internal corruption, inefficiencies, and misappropriation of funds in some charitable organizations have damaged their reputation. For instance, the public backlash over the mask incident involving the Red Cross in Hubei during the epidemic period led to a large number of businesses and individuals requesting refunds.

## **3.2. Reasons for the Issues Faced by Social Organizations in Epidemic Prevention and Control**

### **3.2.1. Immaturity in the Development of Social Organizations**

At present, social organizations are still in their developmental phase. There are deficiencies in organizational capacity building, external and internal developmental drivers. The professional levels of the staff are not high, and governmental support is insufficient. Most of the personnel in social organizations are retired cadres from party and government organs. Their professional enthusiasm is limited, and factors like welfare and benefits limit their ability to attract top talents. However, as modern governance demands collaboration at the grassroots level, the immaturity of social organizations limits their capacity in providing public services and taking over certain governmental functions.

### **3.2.2. Ambiguous Role Boundaries**

The clear definition of social organizations’ roles is crucial for their effective participation in epidemic control. A primary aspect is clarifying their functions and relationships with government agencies [7]. First, there’s a lack of clarity in the respective roles of different entities like residents, social organizations, government agencies, and enterprises. Only by understanding each entity’s role

can they perform efficiently during epidemic control. Second, the relationship between social organizations and the government remains unclear. The government still assumes a dominant position, often taking charge of most tasks, thereby diminishing the role of social organizations.

### **3.2.3. Inadequate Laws and Regulations**

Laws and regulations are vital for the participation of social organizations in societal governance. During the epidemic, relevant departments in China issued guidelines like the “COVID-19 Service Guide” and the “COVID-19 Social Work Service Guide for Specific Groups,” highlighting the role of social organizations in epidemic control. However, these aren’t laws and can’t provide a strong legal foundation. This lack of legal backing results in weaker influence on the public and diminished trustworthiness. On the other hand, there’s a lack of effective supervision over the day-to-day operations of social organizations in China. As a result, some organizations engaged in illegal activities during the epidemic, damaging their reputation and reducing public willingness to donate.

## **4. Optimizing Pathways for Social Organizations to Participate in Public Crisis Management**

### **4.1. Accelerating Organizational Capability Building**

Firstly, elevate the professional level of organizational members. The level of specialization of members determines the action capability of an organization to some extent. On one hand, emergency public event response should be included as part of the regular training for social organizations to ensure an efficient response during sudden events. Social organizations should regularly engage in external exchanges and collaborations, learning and drawing from beneficial international experiences to enhance their capability in addressing public crises. Secondly, enhance the degree of internal governance professionalism. Good internal governance is a hallmark of an organization’s credibility and is key for social organizations to obtain external support [8]. Therefore, social organizations need to improve their systems for fund management, personnel management, and oversight. Additionally, efforts should be made to build up volunteer teams, emphasizing recruitment, training, and management to prevent a shortage of volunteers during sudden public crises.

### **4.2. Streamlining the Relationship Between the Government and Social Organizations**

For diversified entities to participate in social governance, the roles of each entity should be clarified, relationships defined, and governance efficiency improved. As the primary player in social governance, the government’s roles are largely in macro-direction, top-tier design, and supervision. However, specific responsibilities should be delegated to its agencies and social organizations. The relationship between governance entities should transition from one of subordination and control to collaboration. Social organizations should not just passively accept government directives but, within the broader social governance strategy, proactively participate in crisis management. In the growth process of social organizations, the government needs to standardize the channels for social organizations to participate in crisis management, allocating roles based on their characteristics, ensuring they play their part fully [9]. The government also needs to empower social organizations to be as involved as possible in decision-making, increasing their sense of purpose, inspiring lasting passion, fostering an ethos of selfless dedication, and enhancing professional identification, thereby making them vital forces in social governance.

### 4.3. Refining Laws and Regulations

Through legislation and regulation, on one hand, grant legal legitimacy to the actions of social organizations, motivating them to participate in social governance [7]. The government should bolster policy support for social organizations, whose existence and development are underpinned by government support and guidance. The staff and volunteers of social organizations, especially during epidemic periods, face immense work pressure and may feel demotivated when encountering challenges. By providing legal support for social organizations, including financial and personnel policies, it enhances society's acknowledgment and cooperation with the work of social organizations. On the other hand, legislation should regulate the actions of social organizations, defining their governance responsibilities. While social organizations leverage their strengths in participating in social governance, they should also be supervised and guided by the government to ensure their efforts align with overarching objectives, thus improving governance efficiency. Although it's a two-way interaction, the government is the dominant player. It must use the law as its basis, managing its relationship with social organizations well, actively implementing measures to guide and encourage the development of social organizations, and enhancing oversight to regulate their behavior.

### 5. Conclusion

Through examining the practice of social organizations in epidemic prevention and control, this article argues that social organizations possess unique advantages in participating in public crisis management. However, due to their limited capability and insufficient external support, they may struggle to effectively meet societal expectations. To better address sudden public crises and quickly return to normal societal order, more stakeholders, including social organizations, need to be involved in managing sudden public health events [10]. Therefore, in light of the shortcomings revealed by social organizations in the COVID-19 prevention and control efforts, China should promptly glean lessons to better handle future public crises. Through continually delineating the functions of social organizations scientifically, enhancing crisis participation capabilities, China can achieve collaborative and synergistic social governance.

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