

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN CHINA – REDUCING INEQUALITY

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On April 6th 2017, ThinkIN China (TIC) journeyed to the Gulou area for the first time to host an event at the SANY Foundation's 3ESPACE. For its 59th event, TIC welcomed back Professor Klaus Leisinger, a world-renowned expert on sustainable development and corporate responsibility, currently working as senior advisor for the Karl Schlecht Foundation. Other panelists included Maggie Sun of Handicap International, a solidarity organization; Marina Kalnitski from Inclusion Factory, a workshop aimed at increasing the participation rates in the private sector of people with mental or physical health conditions; and Wu Di, program director at Easy Inclusion, a social enterprise that drives workplace inclusion for employees with disabilities.

Panelists warned the audience about the multifaceted manifestations of inequality, often constraining the lives of people with disabilities in education or employment. One of these is monetary inequality, which could be potentially offset by services offered by the state. Yet, these

services need to be financed through taxation, begging the question of what would be the optimal tax rate for their financing. Would it be fair, for instance, to tax wealthier entrepreneurs for the purpose of financing inequality-reducing measures, or could this practice discourage them from joining in the effort altogether? The absence of a one-size-fits-all approach to the issue makes it essential for ordinary citizens to think about what they can do to ameliorate society as actors capable of initiating change.

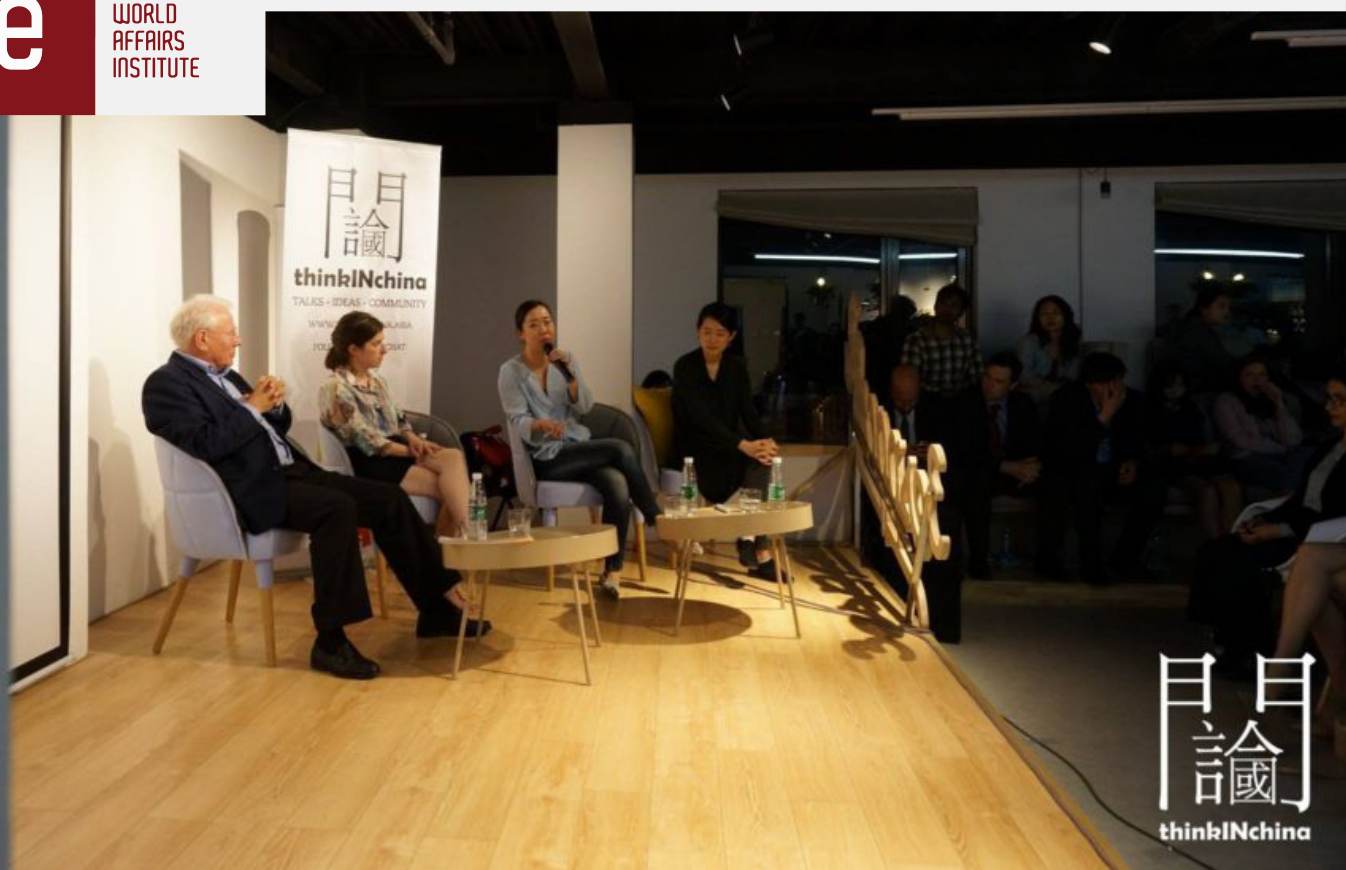
Panelists also discussed some of the major challenges Chinese NGOs currently face while seeking to reduce inequality in the workplace. Panelists noted to have experienced these challenges first-hand. The issue of disability-related discrimination was also addressed, with examples drawn from Handicap International.

What was observed is that China's economic development has made it more difficult for donation-dependent organizations to attract funding. This requires donors to come to terms with the fact that while China has experienced

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ThinkIN China speakers Klaus Leisinger, Maggie Sun, Marina Kalnitski and Wu Di take the stage at 3ESpace in Beijing for the 59th event of ThinkIN China.



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an incredible economic boom and may no longer qualify as a 'developing' country, the societal hurdles affecting its people with disabilities remain significant. When thinking about disabilities, most people may have physical health conditions in mind, but these are only part of a broader and multifaceted picture. As it was noted, holistic approaches aimed at supporting people with various conditions need to be introduced but are still scarce, creating cumbersome situations for a clear majority of people with disabilities, especially in rural areas. Fortunately, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals have equipped NGOs in China with new tools to advance their agenda and more forcefully demand action from central and local governments.

Panelists also raised the issue of running for-profit workshops to raise awareness of long-term sustainability in the workplace, and how to promote this model across China. The reasons for organizing for-profit workshops are compelling: donations cannot be expected to flow in the long-term; thus, the longevity of a project depends on one's respect for social and business principles. Notably, three major challenges might get in the way of running workshops effectively. First is the lack of awareness on disability issues (widespread among middle-ranking managers), which can be potentially overcome by demonstrating that persons with disabilities can take on roles that create value for them, their employers, and their community. This already hints at the second challenge: persons with disabilities might struggle with maintaining their competitiveness. To achieve this, Inclusion Factory has become an example of how companies can team up with suppliers to provide custom-made machinery suitable for the needs of employees with disabilities. Finally, the government needs to play a more substantial role. Without government support for social enterprises, fostering greater inclusion in the workplace may become too difficult of a goal to achieve.

Panelists also highlighted the lack of coherence pertaining to existing definitions of "disability". During the event's Q&A session, an issue that was raised had to do with addressing people with disabilities in an accurate, objective, and neutral manner to avoid discrimination. This highlights the centrality of introducing multi-track approaches to empower people with disabilities, while at the same time improving the social environment around them. Yet, this is only the first step in a long-term process of effective

inclusion: the focus should also be on effectively removing social barriers people with disabilities encounter on a daily basis.

Companies can do their fair share by demonstrating that inclusion pays off in economic terms, as it fosters innovation while creating a more favorable working environment for all. Quotas set by the government may create financial incentives for employers to bring people with disabilities into their teams; yet, without a genuine belief in the value these people could bring based on their abilities and skills, efforts to meet government-set quotas may result in mere tokenism.

Disability among adults also has important implications for training, job and workplace design. Technological progress increases the risks faced by workers who have functional limitations, as they are more exposed to a business environment that is changing at an ever-faster pace. Bearing these risks in mind, it becomes necessary to create business models designed for social enterprises that bring people with disabilities

into their workforce. Challenges might be heightened due to the complexity of tasks employees are required to perform; yet, adaptive business models will find ways to allow for people with disabilities to unleash their potential.

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By definition, projects aimed at boosting inclusion in education and in the workplace develop over the medium-to-long term, usually involving multiple stakeholders. Satisfying the needs of all stakeholders is key to success. In the specific case of China, local governments tend to focus on how much a given project will cost. But once the project in question generates a positive effect on each local government's community and economy, authorities begin to promote the development of similar blueprints as part of effective corporate governance schemes. For inclusion to really take off in China, the public will need to change its attitudes and increase its awareness on the issue. In the end, the promotion of social inclusiveness comes down to every single one of us.



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ThinkIN China is an intellectual community created in Beijing in September 2010 by a small group of young researchers who live and work in China.