

About CiYuan

BSR's three-year CiYuan (China Philanthropy Incubator) initiative builds innovative cross-sector partnerships to enhance the value of social investment in China. With guidance from international and Chinese leaders in the field, CiYuan improves the capacity of local foundations and NGOs to serve as durable and effective partners with business. Ultimately, CiYuan will integrate philanthropy with core business strategy, foster collaboration, and inspire innovation. Visit ciyuan.bsr.org for more information.

About BSR

A leader in corporate responsibility since 1992, BSR works with its global network of more than 250 member companies to develop sustainable business strategies and solutions through consulting, research, and cross-sector collaboration. With offices in Asia, Europe, and North America, BSR uses its expertise in the environment, human rights, economic development, and governance and accountability to guide global companies toward creating a just and sustainable world. Visit www.bsr.org for more information.

About Vantone Foundation

The Vantone Foundation was established in April 2008 and is a private foundation registered under the Beijing Civil Affairs Bureau. The foundation's aim is the promotion of environmental protection and emissions reduction and the harmonious interaction between mankind and nature. Vantone's main focus area is the promotion of eco-community building in China.

About this report

This report was based on interviews and site visits to three eco-communities in Beijing and Tianjin and reflects the situation of communities and stakeholders in these cities. Our findings do not purport to represent the situation of all eco-communities in China.

Vantone Foundation's Eco-Communities Model: Supporting Sustainable Community Development and Nonprofit Capacity Building in China

March 2013

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Vantone Foundation (Vantone) promotes environmental protection and Eco-community building in urban communities. Founded by Vantone real estate group and Vantone Holdings Co., Ltd, Vantone has spent the past four years developing an innovative eco-communities program (see Figure 1) called Eco-Communities – Eco-Life. The program combines theory and practical projects in residential communities—in close cooperation with grassroots nonprofits and community stakeholders.



Figure1: Vantone's Eco-communities Model

Vantone and BSR discussed how the foundation could leverage its stakeholders to attract external resources for the eco-communities programs, and to identify other ways to ensure the sustainability of this program. This will enable Vantone to evaluate its foundation strategy as it scales the eco-communities model into residential communities in central and southern China.

BSR visited a sample of four residential communities to review how Vantone and its partners were implementing eco-community projects in each—with a specific focus on the role that different stakeholder groups play in influencing the success of each eco-community project.

From this review we produced seven recommendations from three angles that implementers of eco-community programs in China need to consider:

- » **Partner Selection & Support:**
 - Select nonprofit partners based on the type of residential community and consideration of their strengths and weaknesses.
- » **Project Implementation:**
 - Create distinct eco-community modules and identify the corresponding resources needed to implement them;
 - Involve residents in each stage of the eco-community project and build communication channels to support ongoing engagement;
- » **Project Sustainability**

Residents Committee (RC) manages the public affairs and welfare services of the residents in a local residential area. As the RC may have specific targets relating to the environmental management of a community to achieve, understanding these goals can help to gauge which initiatives the RC is likely to support which in turn can influence a project's success. The RC may also be able to mobilize residents or influence the property management company operating within a community to participate in programs. RCs are predominantly found in older communities, greater than 15 years old.

A Property Management company plays a role supplying "hardware" and general services to the community such as building maintenance, cleaning and waste management. In some communities they also play a strong role implementing eco-initiatives such as installing recycling bins, facilitating rubbish collection. For newer communities without RCs, the property management company plays a stronger role in supporting the implementation of an eco-community project.

Residents' participation is critical to the success of eco-community projects. If residents aren't aware of or have the skills to take part in an initiative, for example how to recycle, or re-use grey water, the initiative is unlikely to become sustainable.

A nonprofit's supervisory body can influence the implementation of any project, such as an eco-community project, carried out by its related nonprofit. The supervising body's role is to ensure the nonprofit's activities are congruent with their overall objectives and that it follows through on its stated aims. The supervisory body may also provide the nonprofit with advice and feedback. For example, the Beijing Association for Science and Technology attended several of Vantone's AGMs and board meetings. In addition it may also; act as a communication channel between the nonprofit and local government or media which can be helpful for promoting the nonprofit and its programs.

- Establish a mechanism to facilitate communication between stakeholders;
- Leverage a wide range of external resources to support project implementation;
- Balance donor and board member expectations and set realistic targets; and
- Recognize program scalability and sustainability is influenced by many factors including governance systems and stakeholders, community resources and capacity of implementing organization.

BACKGROUND

"Eco-villages" or "eco-communities" are loosely defined as urban or rural communities of people, who strive to integrate a supportive social environment with a low-impact way of life. In the urban communities in China, where Vantone implements its projects, the concept refers more to developing resource-saving and environmentally-friendly initiatives. These initiatives provide communities with affordable and practical eco-technology information and encourage the structured management of their shared resources including: waste and energy reduction, water management, and other initiatives focused on greening the urban environment.

In China, the concept of eco-communities is relatively new. The unique way which residential communities are structured presents challenges for developing a standardized eco-community project model, which ordinarily involves a range of different stakeholders from each community. For example, many communities have a government-affiliated Residential Committee (RC) which supervises and authorizes the implementation of initiatives in their local jurisdiction. The RC in these communities is therefore highly influential over the success of projects such as environmental initiatives. (See side bar for more details about RCs).

OUR APPROACH

BSR conducted site-visits or reviewed documents for projects at four communities and interviewed Vantone staff, project partners, community stakeholders and one board member. The purpose of the interviews was to understand the roles of different actors influencing eco-community projects, their level of involvement in the projects and interaction with Vantone. See Figure 2 below.

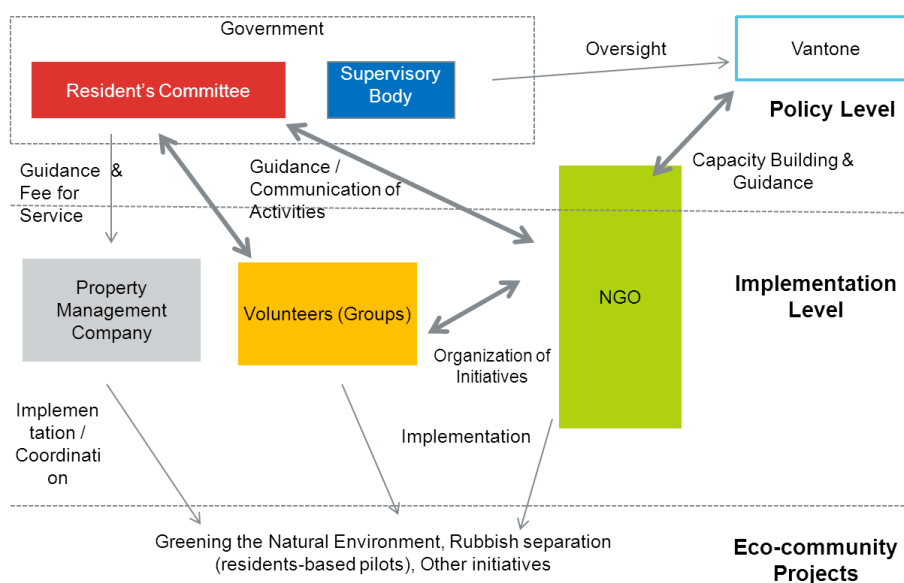


Figure2: MinAn Residential Community Eco-Community Project Stakeholder Map

Volunteer Groups are self-managed by residents and provide ways that residents can participate in community activities. VGs play an important role in initiating community activities and promoting residents participation in them. For example, the MinAn Community's volunteer group designates volunteers which look after the day-to-day maintenance of the community's eco-installations, and has the capacity to engage residents and organize eco-initiatives.

Owner's Committees are self-managed groups which elect property owners to represent the broader interests of home owners within a community. The committee has the decision making power over major issues relating to the overall management of property. For example, the owner's committee at the Vantone-supported Chengdu JiahaoTianyuan eco-community program actively encourages residents' participation in community programs such as planting organic vegetables, waste water treatment and usage, composting and the greening of resident's terraces.

Understanding the different stakeholders was particularly important because each residential community had a different composition of stakeholders and governance structures. (See side bar for profiles of each stakeholder).

The MinAn residential community, for example, was developed in 2000 and is considered a relatively 'old' community. A feature of this kind of community is that the residents committees (RC), who represents the local government in the management of the community, played a pivotal role in supporting the eco-community project. The eco-community project here also worked with a property management company, a nonprofit partner, and a volunteer committee.

FINDINGS

Our review of the Vantone eco-community model revealed the way the foundation develops projects in various communities and interacts with the stakeholders in each community.

Eco-Community Project Development

Vantone's eco-community projects are typically developed in two ways:

- » Vantone staff identify a community need for an eco-initiative and seek a nonprofit partner and/or technical expert(s) to implement a project to meet this need; or
- » Nonprofits submit project proposals to Vantone that align with certain elements of Vantone's eco-community pillars (See Figure 1).

Vantone selects partners based on four key factors:

- » Expertise and experience in community development or environmental protection;
- » Ability to learn and to adjust the skills required for the project (or learn new skills) based on a community's needs;
- » Ability to influence project outcomes via existing relationships with community stakeholders or through resident participation; and
- » Alignment or acceptance of Vantone's eco-community philosophy.

The type of project implemented is then intrinsically linked to the nonprofit partners who bring their own mix of experience and capacity to implement projects and influence other stakeholders in the community.

For the duration of the project, Vantone provides its network of nonprofit partners with training and site visits to communities where eco-initiatives are in place. This enables NGOs to learn from technical experts, observe how projects are being implemented and network with their peers.

While there is no separate formal evaluation process for projects, Vantone monitors the progress of each pilot via reports from its nonprofit partners.

Stakeholder Engagement

Vantone works mostly in close cooperation with its implementing nonprofit partner, who acts as the main point of contact between the foundation and the community stakeholders including the RC, property management company and residents. Vantone maintains communication with its supervisory body around once per year and keeps in contact with experts who support Vantone to provide advice and technical expertise to its nonprofit partners.

Given the differences in governance structures between the old and new communities which influence the mix of stakeholders, it is difficult to apply a standard method for engaging stakeholders across all community types. For example, the TEDA Community in Tianjin does not have a RC but a Social Service Centre based within the community. Here this group has a huge influence over the success of eco-community initiatives, whereas in the MinAn community success is more likely to be determined by their relationship with the RC.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above findings, we outline a number of lessons and success factors which can be drawn from implementing eco-community initiatives in China:

PARTNER SELECTION AND SUPPORT

» **Select NGO partners based on careful consideration of community type and an NGO's strengths and weaknesses**

Given the concept of eco-communities is very new in China, finding a mix of nonprofit partners with the technical and community engagement skills to make the projects successful is challenging. For example, one community was reluctant to work with a nonprofit but due to the nonprofit's good reputation and relationships with some of the community residents and their families, they were able to get access to the community and implement a recycling initiative without RC support. In another case, a nonprofit partner had strong technical skills but was weaker in project monitoring, evaluation, and communications. This meant that Vantone was unable to provide support or take corrective action at key milestones.

Some things implementers of eco-community initiatives can do to support their nonprofit partners include:

- Understanding their partners' strengths and weaknesses so to provide the right mix of soft and technical skills to help ensure the project's success;
- Managing expectations: Do not expect one nonprofit partner to provide the full range of skills necessary to implement an eco-community initiative;
- Inviting external experts to train partners on technical aspects of projects;
- Arranging visits to other community sites so partners can observe how different projects are implemented;
- Setting regular times for check-in with partners to identify any issues early and identify where the foundation can provide support.
- Taking a long-term approach that gives partners the time to learn and develop programs as their ability increases.

Nonprofit Partner Strengths	Ability to Engage Residents	Environmental Expertise	Need for NGO Partner with Environmental Expertise	Need for NGO Partner with Participatory Engagement Expertise
Degree of involvement of Residency or Volunteer Committees	High	High	Low	Low
	High	Medium	Medium	Low
	High	Low	High	Low
	Medium	High	Low	Medium
	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium
	Medium	Low	High	Medium
	Low	High	Low	High
	Low	Medium	Medium	High
	Low	Low	High	High

Figure3: Impact of involvement of Residency or Volunteer Committees on NGO partner selection

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

» **Create distinct eco-community modules and identify the corresponding resources needed to implement them**

Foundations or other implementers of eco-community projects can simplify and break out each element of the eco-community eco-system and identify the hard and soft skills, products or other inputs necessary for implementation. This can help match partners to each discreet section of a project based on their strengths and identify gaps in resources. It can also help adapt initiatives to different community types.



Figure4: Breakdown of different elements of Vantone's Eco-Community Model

- » **Involve residents in each stage of the eco-community project and build communication channels to support ongoing engagement**
- Understanding how to enable residents to change their behavior over the long term is the single greatest challenge in the uptake of eco-community projects. Residents should be involved in projects at the design phase. For communities with RCs, the RC can play a role in facilitating discussion on eco-initiatives through inviting residents to meetings and supporting general project advocacy. To help residents understand the workings of a specific eco-initiative including what their role is and the anticipated benefits or outcomes, foundations or other implementers can:
- Hold project demonstrations in high thoroughfare areas which allow residents to observe and participate in activities, rather than engage in passive means of communication such as posting fliers;
 - Partner with stakeholders such as the Property Management group to send text messages to residents to inform them about eco-activities within the community;
 - Have a fixed structure or presence within a community, such as a “volunteer station”, to provide residents with direct access to information on eco-initiatives or a means to get involved in current or future initiatives;
 - Provide residents with feedback on eco-initiatives so that members of the community are kept aware of progress and are encouraged to keep participating in the project; and
 - Consider the demographics of a community and target different eco-initiatives to different groups. For example, a program on kitchen rubbish recycling could focus on young adults or middle-aged residents who do most of the family cooking, whereas plant and vegetable growing, or other initiatives that help improve the aesthetics of the community, may appeal to retirees or elders that have more time to participate.

PROJECT SUSTAINABILITY

- » **Establish a mechanism to facilitate communication between stakeholders**
- It is critical to ensure there is adequate understanding and consultation between the different types of stakeholders within communities. Managers of eco-community projects can set up a mechanism to promote regular communication and participation in the project design and implementation such as an eco-community committee comprising representatives from each stakeholder group specific to that community. This mechanism should be established early when the project is being designed to help gather suggestions; identify resources; and clarify each stakeholder's role and identify ways to collaborate and engage residents.

The ability of the project partner to build a strong relationship with the RC may also be beneficial. For example, early interaction between Huizeren¹ and the Secretary of the MinAn RC was helpful in establishing a good relationship between the two organizations. More frequent communication between stakeholders can also help managers of eco-community projects understand who the key influencing organizations are.

» **Leverage a wide range of external resources to support project implementation**

Eco-community initiators (could be a foundation, individual, school, membership group etc) should make use of the external resources available to them that could help with project implementation be it through their board, supervisory body, industry association, academics or local government. One way to do this could be to establish a resource platform or knowledge bank, or eco-community stakeholder network to help to share resources and best practices, connect technical experts with nonprofit partners across communities or identify organizations that could provide funding. These resources can supplement those already provided by the foundation or project sponsor and help build the technical capacity of nonprofits to enhance project outcomes.

» **Manage donor and board member expectations and set realistic targets**

Often stakeholders such as board members want to see quick results from the organization's investments within a short period of time. For managers of eco-community initiatives, this can be difficult to demonstrate in the short term as the impact of projects which rely on behavioral change take time. NGO partners can play a role to help communicate with donors or board members to manage expectations and establish realistic goals for eco-community initiatives. Targets that focus on relative change, such a percentage increase in green coverage of a community façade, can help communicate where change is taking place.

» **Program scalability and sustainability is influenced by many factors:**

• **Governance systems & stakeholders**

Due to the differences in community governance systems and stakeholders, it is difficult to develop a one-size fits all model that can be easily scaled. Even though Vantone has a well-developed eco-community model, it was necessary to tailor this model to each community and do a needs-analysis of each community's eco-needs before implementing a project. This has implications for scaling the model to different parts of China.

• **Community Resources**

Eco-community programs also rely on the resources of the community itself in order to become sustainable. For example, interest from residents to participate in eco-initiatives and the capacity of the property management group to provide services also influence project sustainability.

• **Project Resources**

The physical presence of the project manager in different cities impacts the ability to successfully take the project to scale. For example, eco-community initiatives in Beijing where Vantone and other technical experts are based, can more easily receive one-on-one training or support than projects in other areas.

APPENDIX

Overview of Projects

The below table outlines the various types and goals of the four eco-community projects reviewed or visited for this case study:

¹Based in Beijing, Huizeren was established in 2003 as a local capacity building organization specializing in volunteer training and civil society development. Huizeren was one of Vantone's nonprofit partners in the MinAn eco-community program.

Project	Community	Nonprofit Partners
Tianjin Development Zone Eco-Community & New city Community Governance Model	Tianjin Eco-development Area (TEDA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tianjin Environmental Science Students Association Green Education Work Committee - Tianjin Economic Development Area Taida Social Services Centre
Building Participatory Eco-Communities	Dongcheng District	Shining Stone
Building Eco-Communities for Mutual Enjoyment	Dongcheng District (3 pilots): Long Shan, MinAn, QiNan	Huizeren
Community Rubbish Zero Waste” Pilot	Haidian New Northern District	Friends of Nature