



LEVERAGING INTERMEDIARIES TO MAXIMISE CORPORATE SOCIAL IMPACT



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About the Case Study

Supporting and leveraging intermediaries can enable corporates to be more effective in their social impact activities. Field-building intermediaries, in particular, create a domino effect by catalysing the growth of the social sector as a whole. This case study uses the example of NPI (Enpai), the pioneering and possibly the largest field-building intermediary in China, to demonstrate how working with and supporting such organisations has enabled different corporate entities in China to expand their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and sustainability efforts. The insights from this example can help corporates across Asia better understand how to work with intermediaries to deploy mandatory CSR and sustainability funding more effectively.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<div>1</div> <div>From Corporate Social Responsibility to Corporate Social Impact — 05</div> <div>1.1 Trends for Strategic Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in South and Southeast Asia — 06</div> <div>1.2 Common Challenges for Achieving Impactful Corporate Social Engagement — 07</div>	<div>2</div> <div>How are Intermediaries a Catalyst for Strategic CSR? — 10</div> <div>2.1 About NPI — 13</div>	<div>3</div> <div>How Corporates in China have leveraged Partnership with NPI — 16</div> <div>3.1 Corporates look to NPI to understand their social impact strategy — 16</div> <div>3.2 Maximising Corporate Social Impact through Intermediaries — 20</div>
<div>4</div> <div>How can Intermediaries Expand Support During a Crisis? — 22</div> <div>4.1 Leveraging Intermediaries' Networks for Collective Impact — 22</div> <div>4.2 Leveraging Intermediaries' Local Expert Knowledge to Deliver Impact — 23</div>	<div>5</div> <div>How can Corporates Support Capacity Building for Intermediaries? — 26</div> <div>5.1 Help Intermediaries Achieve Financial Sustainability — 27</div> <div>5.2 Support Intermediaries to Develop Their Critical Role in Ecosystem Building — 27</div> <div>5.3 Integrate Intermediaries in Corporate Social Impact Engagements to Achieve Multiplier Effect — 28</div>	<div>6</div> <div>Now, Where Do You start? — 29</div> <div>Note on Methodology — 30</div> <div>Appendix — 31</div>

Abbreviations

CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
HNW	High Net Worth
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NPO	Non-Profit Organisation
SE	Social Enterprise
SPO	Social Purpose Organisation

Executive Summary

Corporate entities are becoming increasingly sophisticated in their social and environmental impact strategies in response to public demand for greater accountability. They are moving beyond traditional corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities, which tend to be ad-hoc grants or project-based engagements, to explore new models that are more inclusive, strategic and collaborative.

CSR is only one of many ways in which corporates can create social impact alongside economic value. Other approaches to corporate social impact include philanthropy, employee volunteering, developing new business models such as inclusive businesses and social accelerators, and establishing foundations or impact funds to support ecosystem growth.

Intermediaries can act as a conduit for corporate social impact initiatives, working with organisations and Social-Purpose Organisations to ground activities in a coherent framework in line with the company’s core business values. Supporting and leveraging intermediaries can enable corporates to be more effective in their social impact activities. Investing in field-building intermediaries, in particular, creates a domino effect by catalysing the growth of the social sector as a whole through deploying financial and non-financial resources.

In particular, this case will:

- 

Guide corporates on how to build meaningful partnerships with intermediaries in their own markets
- 

Illustrate how corporates can strategically leverage intermediaries to achieve their impact objectives
- 

Provide insights on how corporate partnerships with intermediaries can ensure collective impact, especially during a crisis
- 

Identify areas in which corporates can support capacity building for intermediaries to amplify their own effectiveness
- 

Introduce intermediaries as potential partners for corporates

1

From Corporate Social Responsibility to Corporate Social Impact

Societies are increasingly demanding that corporate entities demonstrate leadership in social and environmental issues. People expect companies to be responsible and accountable to their communities, and choose to align themselves either as customers or employees with those that share their values and beliefs. As a result, corporates are becoming increasingly sophisticated in their impact strategies, moving beyond traditional activities, which tend to be ad-hoc grants or project-based engagements to explore new models that are more inclusive, strategic and collaborative.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is generally understood as a company's efforts to consider the social and environmental consequences of its business activities in the interest of its stakeholders while maintaining financial value for its shareholders.¹ CSR is sometimes referred to as corporate citizenship, highlighting a firm's obligation to the public and an internal adherence to integrity as a core value. While there is no one approach to develop a CSR or sustainability strategy, the ultimate goal of all companies is to maximise the organisation's social impact footprint while extending the company's core business values. CSR activities often focus on enhancing employee engagement or participation in community development and philanthropy.² Compliance-based CSR, however, results in uncoordinated initiatives which prioritise image-building that are mostly unrelated to core business operations.

Companies are increasingly moving toward deliberate integration of social responsibility and environmental challenges into the company’s core business strategy.³ Such strategic approaches to CSR are closely linked to the business desire to demonstrate achievements and account for a **triple bottom line: financial, environmental, and social**.⁴ Other methods to achieve corporate social impact include corporate philanthropy or giving, employee volunteering, developing new business models for inclusive growth such as social businesses and accelerators, and establishing foundation or impact funds, with an aim to support ecosystem growth (See Figure 1).⁵



Figure 1 - **Diversity of Corporate Social Impact Approaches**

Note: Taken insights from “Strategically Leveraging Corporate Resources for Social Impact,” Steven Serneels, CEO & Board Member, European Venture Philanthropy Association (EVPA), AVPN Virtual Conference, 2020.

1.1 Trends for Strategic Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in South and Southeast Asia

Strategic CSR is well underway in South and Southeast Asian economies but growing unevenly. In general, **multinational corporations are driving best practices**, while local companies are still lagging with weaker implementation.⁶

In India, corporate entities are incentivised to contribute to social impact work through a national mandate for CSR.⁷ Section 135 of the Indian Companies Act, 2013, or the CSR clause, which came into effect in April 2014, mandates corporates of a certain size to contribute at least 2% of their average net profit of the past three years to CSR activities.⁸ In Indonesia, a 2007 legislation mandated companies in the energy and extractive industries to disclose their CSR activities. However, implementation guidelines are still being developed, resulting in the law being largely unenforceable. Despite this, there have been **increasing CSR investments by local and international companies** in recent years, signalling corporate recognition of the benefits of supporting local social causes.⁹ The House of Representatives of the Philippines passed the “Corporate Social Responsibility Act of 2011,” which directs all business organisations established and operating under the Philippines Law to contribute to CSR voluntarily.¹⁰ In early 2019, a CSR bill that seeks to institutionalise CSR in corporations got a second reading in the House.¹¹ The bill, if passed, will require all domestic or foreign companies to contribute to CSR.

While these are positive trends, there is still much work to be done to strategically align CSR with the companies' value and culture to fund activities that are impactful and cost-effective.

1.2 Common Challenges for Achieving Impactful Corporate Social Engagement

Legislation aside, corporates face some common challenges in South and Southeast Asia that hold them back from achieving their broader vision of CSR and expected outcomes.

Challenge 1:

Trust Deficit Between Companies and Nonprofits

Companies and nonprofits operate on contrasting premises, with the former focused on maximising shareholder value and the latter primarily concerned with maximising stakeholder value. This misalignment often manifests in a trust deficit and a lack of understanding between both parties, resulting in challenges in collaboration. Some CSR programmes, for example, aim primarily at corporate public relations or image building, which run counter to nonprofits' desire to create tangible outcomes for beneficiaries.

The **absence of long-term CSR vision** may be due to companies lacking an understanding of social issues and solutions at hand. As a result, CSR spending coalesces in specific sectors and social causes depending on

companies' pre-set priorities. Combined with the trust deficit, corporates tend to prefer short-term, one-off projects to fulfil spending requirements to achieve targets rather than investing in long-term social sector development. However, these may leave out more urgent needs on the ground.

In India, companies tend to solely focus on the listed activities in Schedule VII of Section 135 as legitimate CSR activities, like in education and health, but this means other major issues such as those related to vulnerable communities, child protection, and urban planning are neglected.¹² In the Philippines, many companies prefer to embark on CSR initiatives on education, environment, disaster response and recovery, and livelihood projects.¹³ In addition to these cause-specific initiatives, more strategic CSR efforts could be placed on erecting capacity-building programmes for social purpose organisations (SPOs, includes nonprofit organisations and social enterprises) working in these cause areas or designing innovative multi-stakeholder partnerships between corporates and social enterprises (SEs) to build on the **long-term shared value programme**.¹⁴

The lack of strategic planning or efforts to cultivate a mutual understanding of the common goal could result in mismatched expectations and widen the trust deficit between companies and implementing NGOs. Companies need **reliable local partners**, such as intermediaries, to help them engage in interventions that provide more sustainable solutions to social problems.

Challenge 2

Bias in CSR Implementation

Effective implementation is hindered by factors such as geography and corporate **due diligence requirements**. Firms are inclined to fund projects that are physically located closer to their offices. In India, the Companies Act stipulated that companies should give preference to the local areas where they operate. As a result, about 88% of companies have implemented projects in the locality where they are present.¹⁵ On the other hand, nonprofits registered in central Indian states such as Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Uttar Pradesh which are less industrialised received at least 40% less CSR funding than other regions.¹⁶ This **uneven distribution of CSR funding** and activities may compound the already unequal social development.

Organisations may find difficulty in finding projects that strike a balance between meeting the organisation's due diligence requirements and aligning with its CSR objectives. Lacking this balance may result in asymmetric resource distribution toward already well-established nonprofits rather than smaller or new NGOs with local knowledge. While nonprofit organisations in India have received CSR funds since 2014, with 43% of funds spent from 2016 to 2019 disbursed through them, smaller nonprofits have been less likely to benefit. This is because corporates tend to favour nonprofits with a long-standing track record, the capacity to generate measurable impact, and an established organisational structure to showcase the effectiveness of the projects they support, all of which tend to imply a certain scale of operations.¹⁷

Challenge 3:

Lack of Strategic Planning in CSR

While many corporates are keen to contribute to social issues, they lack the experience to identify appropriate projects to support or a coherent theory of change framework to connect various programmes.

Innovation and experimentation by **pooling CSR resources** can expand the impact of CSR. For instance, the Philippines Business for Social Progress (PBSP) adopts a collective impact strategy by **pooling** member-companies' CSR resources to multiply the development benefits and scale impact.¹⁸ Other creative approaches to social funding may include gathering CSR funds to help develop SE's business skills or to support SPOs to scale and multiply the corporate's social impact.¹⁹ This can help corporates, particularly those starting on their CSR journey, to achieve their goals without absorbing too much risk themselves.

Challenge 4:

Neglecting Capacity Building as Part of Strategic CSR

While it is commendable that corporates are increasingly focusing on measuring impact and outcomes of their CSR activities rather than churning out activities without measurement, they continue to overlook a critical underlying need: non-profit capacity building. With a sharpened focus on specific social causes, projects involving capacity building, advocacy,

and research, which are necessary for building, not just the nonprofit's infrastructure but the sector as a whole, often do not receive the same attention.²⁰

Costs associated with capacity building, such as research and development to build technical expertise, administration, upgrading physical assets, and maintenance of field and network operations, are all crucial considerations in CSR efforts to achieve long-term impact through the implementing NGOs.²¹ Corporates are well-positioned to provide **business mentorship and skills-coaching** to these organisations as part of their CSR activities. Still, they tend to overlook this, even when expecting the NGOs to demonstrate a measurable impact that reflects the company's values.



2

How Intermediaries can be a Catalyst for Strategic CSR?

Intermediaries can act as a conduit for CSR programmes as well as other corporate social impact initiatives, working with organisations and SPOs to ground activities in a coherent framework in line with the company's core business values. Leveraging intermediaries extends the companies' influence within society at large. Intermediaries can help corporates co-create programmes with strong local relevance and resonance to maximise impact and engender systemic change. However, the needs may differ in different markets, and it behooves corporates to identify the right partner for their own objectives.

NPI is one of the largest and most comprehensive intermediaries in Asia and, as a conduit and knowledge hub, has been able to proactively align several corporates' CSR objectives towards achieving both their own goals as well as supporting the social sector. By leveraging corporate engagement to support social impact work and strengthen the social integration of SPOs across the public and private sectors, **NPI has pooled cross-sectoral resources** to grow the social sector. During the Covid-19 crisis, NPI helped contextualise corporates' needs for delivering impact by efficiently and effectively facilitating multi-stakeholder collaborations.

What are Intermediaries?

Intermediaries support governments, corporates, funders, and SPOs to build the ecosystem in more impactful ways. They act as coordinators between SPOs and social investors, facilitating more effective and efficient alliances to maximise impact.²² For corporates looking to achieve a specific social outcome through different types of engagements, intermediaries serve as a hub for coordinating this complex action to steer all stakeholders toward the defined goal.²³

Intermediaries come in all shapes and sizes and include the following:²⁴

- 1** **Incubators, accelerators and capacity builders:** Organisations that provide facilities, expertise and other forms of non-monetary support to entrepreneurs.
- 2** **Networks and platforms:** Online and offline locations that convene stakeholders.
- 3** **Research and knowledge:** Academic institutions and organisations that publish insights and thought pieces on the development of the social economy.

Working with intermediaries can help corporates achieve multiple goals:

- Provide strategic advice to navigate complex local systems
- Leverage their sector expertise to inform decision-making
- Facilitate smooth collaboration between corporates and local partners with in-depth local knowledge of the ground
- Reduce the transaction cost of finding the right local partners and developing credible projects
- Build capacity for strategic CSR and SPO collaborations for better value alignment
- Mobilise multi-sector capital, knowledge, and business capabilities to fill in gaps in the ecosystem
- Facilitate corporates in achieving greater impact with business relevance through shared value creation

Field-Building Intermediaries

A field-building intermediary is an intermediary with specialist knowledge, local connections, and networks as well as the resources required to facilitate relationships between different actors and stakeholders towards building a sector.²⁵ Field-building intermediaries serve as a **catalyst to unify various players**, deploying additional capabilities to augment a fragmented landscape and working towards an overall ecosystem change.²⁶

The functions of field-building intermediaries encompass the following:²⁷

- Providing specialist capacity and expertise to strengthen the field
- Serving as the foundational backbone to coordinate local and regional cross-sector stakeholders
- Providing evidence-based research and advice to improve and scale solutions

What is a field?²⁸

An ecosystem of individuals and organisations, leveraging individual strengths and a set of strategies, working together toward a **common goal**. This ecosystem may include intermediaries, corporates, social investors, governments, nonprofits, and SPOs.

What do field-building intermediaries do?

- Field-building intermediaries play a critical role in redirecting resources to the most effective and urgent programmes for field development.
- Field-building intermediaries provide essential brokerage to support SPOs across the continuum of capital.
- Field-building intermediaries aim to catalyse systems change in the field.

Intermediaries can become a catalyst for strategic CSR, helping companies deepen their engagement with the social sector.

Depending on the local context and the needs of the corporates, some intermediaries may be more crucial than others to achieve the desired impact. For example, a field-building intermediary with in-depth local knowledge and network can provide the necessary advice and save corporates time and effort in identifying the right implementing NGOs and other local partners. With their ecosystem development perspective, field-building intermediaries can steer corporates into thinking long-term so that resources can be directed to areas of critical need. The development of NPI provides an excellent example for corporates to explore different ways to leverage intermediaries. Given the range of expertise it has built in the last 15 years, understanding its experience in working with corporates may give rise to more such partnerships for organisations at various stages of CSR.

About NPI

NPI (pronounced Enpai in Chinese) is an intermediary based in China specialising in providing multifaceted support services to SPOs, government, corporates, and social investors to develop the social sector across the country. NPI was the first and is the best-known nonprofit incubator in the country, working across the continuum of capital to support SPOs at different growth stages. NPI is an umbrella organisation with multiple portfolio organisations and independent sub-business groups under a single corporate identity in China's major cities. This enables it to offer comprehensive and multi-dimensional support services for SPOs through vertical and horizontal integration with government, corporates, and NGOs nationwide.²⁹

NPI's Early History

When NPI was founded in 2006, the Chinese government had just loosened the registration criteria for NGOs. The number of NGOs was limited, and the existing ones were small with little growth potential. NPI founder Zhao Lyu saw an opportunity to adapt the incubator model used in the business sector to incubate and accelerate the growth of local NGOs. The World Bank, Narada Foundation and Ford Foundation together provided seed funding for NPI,³⁰ and it was registered with the support of the Civil Affairs Bureau in Pudong New District, Shanghai. The first nonprofit

incubation programme was offered soon after. In 2007, it enrolled 16 emerging and newly established NGOs looking for capacity building support, co-working space, and legal advice.³¹

NPI sees its mission as catalysing impactful development of the social sector by serving as an intermediary to connect government and corporate resource providers with SPOs. NPI has forged strong partnerships with corporates and government over the years, resulting in 60% of its funding coming from the business sector and 40% from government contracts. HSBC and Ford Motor are its two longest-standing partners, each having collaborated with NPI for about eight years. Most corporates have worked with NPI for more than three years. Such long-term corporate partnerships are rare for nonprofits in China.

Since its inception, NPI has launched around 20 local offices and established nearly 60 project sites nationwide, including in Shanghai, Beijing, Shenzhen, and Chengdu. In 2010, the Ministry of Civil Affairs invited NPI to replicate its model to establish similar local organisations.³² Soon after, there were more than 300 incubators at the city and provincial levels to assist in incubating local social organisations. At its peak, NPI directly managed up to 14 incubators and provided technical support for another 30 incubators.³³

NPI in 2020

To date, NPI has incubated over 1,400 SPOs and provided capacity-building services to more than 4,000 SPOs and countless nonprofit practitioners. In addition, NPI has pioneered several initiatives, including piloting the first nonprofit incubator in China, co-establishing the first grassroots Public Fundraising Platform (Shanghai United Foundation) and a private foundation (NPI Foundation), promoting venture philanthropy among government and corporates to invest in early-stage SPOs, and embarking on impact investing (NPI Impact Fund) to further support nonprofit organisations and SEs financially. Having a wide variety of legal entities under its umbrella—from Non-Profit Organisations (NPOs), foundation, equity company to locally registered office—gives NPI the flexibility to cater to diverse corporate needs. In fact, as a result of its wide-ranging capabilities, incubation services only accounted for 20 to 25% of its revenue at the time of writing.³⁴

In 2020, in consultation with its government, foundation, and corporate partners, NPI embraced a grander mission: to build a support system for community construction through innovative practices and continued advocacy, bolstering China's systematic social development. NPI's services now include a function to support its portfolio organisations and SPOs at different stages through active resource facilitation from the government, corporates, and other social investors to nurture talents in the social sector. These include nonprofit and SE incubation, capacity building, community services platform, government procurement evaluation, venture philanthropy, corporate engagement, fund management, and the operation of innovative spaces. This broad range of services makes NPI an attractive partner for

corporate collaboration. As NPI has grown in impact and influence, corporates have been able to leverage its knowledge-base and insight into best practices to design the next phase of their journeys.

NPI's Focus Areas

Support Social Innovation	Social Enterprise Incubation & Acceleration Nonprofit Incubator Impact Investing
Nurture Nonprofit Talent	Online and Offline Learning Platforms <ul style="list-style-type: none">Duobaan Learning PlatformsEnpai University
Promote Community Building	Capacity-building for community service organisations Channel resources into the community Empower community Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) on philanthropy Operate community public spaces Conduct community related research
Invigorate Public Space	Entrust social incubation and social innovation space <ul style="list-style-type: none">724 Planet
Increase Funding Efficacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Zheng Dao (Nonprofit Funding Information Management System)Yi Guang Nian (Nonprofit Evaluation and Impact Assessment)NPI Equity Investment Co., Ltd (equity investment for early-stage SPOs)
Advocate Nonprofit Ideals	NPO/SE Fair and Roadshow Social Entrepreneurs (magazine) NPI Public Account and Website
Provide Value-added Services	Develop Technology-empowered nonprofit services

Source: Data collected from the NPI website, news coverage, publications, and interviews with NPI.



3

How Corporates in China have leveraged Partnership with NPI

Intermediaries like NPI help corporates understand their long-term social impact beyond initial funding. Partnership with NPI helps these businesses to understand what the community needs so that they can align their approaches towards shared objectives and values that could benefit the ecosystem in the long run.

3.1 Corporates look to NPI to understand their social impact strategy

Before undertaking any project, NPI engages in extensive landscape analysis of social development in the targeted community to generate grounded insights. This facilitates the crafting of a collaboration strategy that **aligns local needs with corporate values**, with a long-term planning perspective. It enables corporates to engage in neglected areas and address gaps in the system that require active ecosystem builders. It also motivates corporates to pilot innovative funding practices such as **risk-pooling mechanisms** to support early-stage SPOs. NPI's nonprofit incubator and public fundraising platform, Shanghai United Foundation, were among the projects established in this way—through proactively pooling funding from government, corporates, and foundations.

NPI has actively encouraged corporate partners to explore venture philanthropy approaches that **combine financial and non-financial support**, such as providing business expertise and in-kind donations. In fact, the venture philanthropy competition model has become the de facto entry point for corporate and government partnerships with NPI. These projects could not have achieved the current scale and impact without corporate buy-in to NPI's vision.

The earliest venture philanthropy programme in China was a 2007 partnership between the Lenovo Group and NPI. The first round of investment of RMB 3 million (USD 430,000) went towards incubating 16 innovative NPOs working on issues including poverty, education, and environment.³⁵ The success of this pilot saw the Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau setting aside RMB 10 million (USD 1.43 million) of the revenue from the Welfare Lottery to pilot the first city-level venture philanthropy programme in 2009.³⁶ The fund supported 59 projects out of 154 applications. NPI administered the programme by assessing the proposals and providing capacity-building support to the competition participants.

Corporates leverage NPI to facilitate funding and non-financial support for SPOs

In a developing market context, SPO funding generally comes from government grants, international NGOs, or philanthropic organisations. Diversifying funding sources is vital for SPOs to become less reliant on grants and more financially sustainable. Corporates can contribute to

this diversification by partnering with intermediaries like NPI to broker **relationships and tie-up capital** in the business sector with government resources to support SPOs.

In 2015, NPI established a private foundation, the NPI Foundation, in which it created a special programme for social entrepreneurship to better support the nascent SPOs with long-term growth potential. For example, in 2017, Sohu, the Chinese Internet company, made a special donation to the NPI Foundation to fund a nationwide competition on social entrepreneurship.³⁷ NPI also launched the NPI Impact Fund, which pooled its own resources with funds from foundations and other social investors to make equity investments and provide non-financial support to early-stage SEs to increase their market competitiveness. It conducted due diligence on nearly one hundred SEs from 2016 to 2018 to identify suitable candidates. It focused on SEs working in areas such as social sector development, community care for the elderly, education, poverty alleviation, and environment. In 2018, NPI registered a new legal entity in Ningbo, NPI Equity Investment Co., Ltd. to more systematically support the NPI Impact Fund in identifying and investing in outstanding SEs.³⁸ Corporates and foundations were forthcoming in providing support in establishing these entities, recognising that these efforts would enable them to be more effective in deploying capital towards SEs. Besides financial resources, NPI also facilitated non-financial support to SPOs, such as working with Deloitte China in 2018 to match consulting experts with suitable SPOs through volunteer speed dating.³⁹

Corporates look to NPI for long-term strategy that aligns the goal on both sides

NPI works closely with corporates to craft proposals that align with the goals of all organisations involved. The **Community Partnership Programme** jointly initiated by HSBC and NPI in 2013, for example, has been providing financial capital, capacity training, and infrastructure building to support community development in China for eight years running. It is one of the most extensive community-building programmes in China funded by a financial organisation.⁴⁰ When HSBC wanted to expand its focus in 2018, it worked alongside NPI to explore new collaboration areas.⁴¹ As a result, the **HSBC China Social Enterprises Facilitation and Incubation Programme** was started in 2018, and implemented with NPI in multiple locations around the country. The programme included competitions for social entrepreneurs, camps, incubators, investment alliances, special social innovation zones, and other financial models to help seed-stage SPOs.⁴² It attracted 400 applications, with 31 SPOs selected for the incubation process in 2018. NPI helped organise 120 hours of capacity-building courses for the selected SPOs and closely worked with HSBC to match them with 100 entrepreneurial and professional mentors to help them scale.⁴³

HSBC China – NPI Strategic Partnership

When?

2013 – present.

Partnership Trajectory

- 2013: HSBC partnered with NPI to initiate the “HSBC Community Partnership Programme.”⁴⁴
- 2018: HSBC partnered with NPI to launch the “HSBC China Social Enterprise Facilitation and Incubation Programme.”
- 2019: The official launch of the “The Most Investment-Ready Social Enterprises Top 20” Roadshow to showcase the newly incubated SEs with the highest investment potential to nurture entrepreneurship and encourage social innovation.⁴⁵

In another notable example, in 2012, Ford Motor and NPI worked together to launch **Operation Better World** as its global CSR initiative.⁴⁶ Through this initiative, Ford Motor set to drive sustainable environmental innovation in local communities through strategic CSR. In China, Ford Motor leveraged NPI’s expertise in capacity building and nonprofit incubation to run **Level Up**, which provides incubation services and mentorship to local environmental NGOs to sharpen their delivery of sustainability outcomes. It also created a

series of training courses and built widespread learning networks (online and physical) for environmental nonprofits in China. Additionally, NPI supported Ford Motor's employee volunteering programme by conducting volunteer performance assessment.

In 2018, after a six-year partnership, Ford Motor's strategic CSR shifted from environmental sustainability to youth entrepreneurship and innovation. NPI worked with the team to develop a new strategy that incorporated the brand's legacy as well as responded to China's national campaign on **Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation**. In 2018, Ford Motor and NPI jointly launched a venture philanthropy competition named **Ford UCAN Project: The Future of Transportation**, which paired engineering students in college with engineers at Ford Motors to design environmentally-friendly and future-ready travel modes.⁴⁷

By the end of 2019, the "Operation Better World" in China had supported 443 environmental organisations and individuals with grants totalling RMB 28.1 million (USD 4 million) and provided over 5,100 hours of capacity-building services for over 560 organisations. More than 14,000 employees and their families had contributed nearly 63,000 hours of volunteer service.⁴⁸

Ford Motor – NPI Strategic Partnership

When?

2012 – present.

Partnership Trajectory

- 2012: Ford Motor Company Fund launched the "Operation Better World" global CSR initiative that included "Ford Conservation and Environmental Grants, China," its key programme focusing on environmental impact. NPI became the strategic partner of Ford Motor's CSR programme in China—the "Level Up" and the "Ford SH Volunteer Corps" to support capacity building for China's environmental NGOs.
- 2018: Ford Motor and NPI jointly launched the "Ford UCAN Project: The Future of Transportation" to focus on youth entrepreneurship and innovation.
- 2019: NPI became the national partner of Ford Motor's "Operation Better World" strategic CSR programme in China (the partnership started in 2012) that sponsored 443 environmental organisations and individuals with a total grant of RMB 28.1 million (USD 3.9 million).

Intermediaries can increase corporates' visibility, demonstrate their value and help promote impactful best practices

Created in 2009, NPI's magazine Social Entrepreneurs publishes stories of local and global grassroots NPOs and SEs. Its polished and professional content makes the magazine one of the most popular publications on social issues. This, in turn, improves the visibility of NPI and its partners to the government, other corporates, and the public.

As part of its partnership with Ford Motors, NPI helped create and operate the website, a Wechat public account and database specifically to increase public awareness of its CSR programme in China. NPI also held roadshows, public conferences, and other public events to raise Ford Motors' visibility. As mentioned earlier, as part of its partnership with HSBC, in 2019 NPI organised an event to announce [The Most Investment-Ready Social Enterprises Top 20](#) selected for HSBC's "China Social Enterprise Facilitation and Incubation Programme."

These publicity events and coverage increase corporate visibility in the social impact arena and demonstrate NPI's commitment to mutual accountability and transparency. The strategy also helps create resonance with other corporates that may be considering expanding their CSR and sustainability programmes. Effective marketing and communication channels further help NPI's corporate partners gain credibility among governments and SPOs.



3.2 Maximising Corporate Social Impact through Intermediaries

Intermediaries like NPI are capable of assisting corporates in creating more social and economic value through various social impact endeavours. As illustrated by the figure below, intermediaries can help corporates at any stage of the social impact journey. Their expertise comes in handy when defining the focus for corporates' strategic CSR and designing innovative programmes for employee engagement. Beyond that, intermediaries' in-depth on-ground knowledge can help corporates make informed decisions in corporate giving and reduce transaction cost to find the right community partners. With their deep local connections, intermediaries can help gather multi-sector knowledge, capital, and capabilities to fill the gaps in the ecosystem to achieve more holistic development of corporate social impact, like in the areas of corporate impact fund and social/inclusive business. Ultimately, the value for corporates working with an intermediary like NPI through forging long-term partnerships is the multiplier effect that this has brought to benefit business and society mutually (See Figure 2).



Figure 2 - **How Intermediaries Can Maximise Corporate Social Impact**

4

How to use Intermediaries to Expand Support During a Crisis

Intermediaries can be invaluable in crisis situations, such as developing an immediate response to the Covid-19 pandemic or in assisting corporates to quickly mobilise resources and support to reach the most needed groups and vulnerable communities through their extensive local networks. By working closely with intermediaries, corporates can contribute to building alliances to disperse financial and non-financial capital for collective impact.

4.1 Leveraging Intermediaries' Networks for Collective Impact

Corporates without deep local connections place great value on the **nationwide community networks** that NPI has built over the years to pool resources for communities in need. NPI, on its own, has the capacity to reach 2,000 communities nationwide directly. It leverages its regional hub organisations to reach over 4,000 communities nationwide.⁴⁹ Corporates can benefit from harnessing NPI's extensive community coverage to achieve a more significant social impact in times of urgency. This is one key reason many corporates turned to NPI at the height of the COVID-19 crisis in China.

NPI co-founded the **Community Against Covid-19 Alliance** within four weeks of the Wuhan lockdown, along with many long-standing corporate foundations and institutional partners.⁵⁰ These included HSBC Community Partnership Programme, Lenovo Foundation, and Vanke Foundation.⁵¹ The Alliance raised RMB 1.28 million (USD 182,000) to support 33 local projects. These projects address the needs of the elderly, children, women, disabled, poor and vulnerable, especially those that suffered from the economic downturn through community service, social work, and volunteering.

The Community Against Covid-19 Alliance was formalised as the **China Community Catalyst (CCC)** in April 2020.⁵² The CCC aimed to empower frontline community workers and vulnerable populations during the Covid-19 pandemic through proactively pooling cross-sectoral resources in the community to establish a long-term and systematic community resilience mechanism. CCC also supports an online-learning and capacity-building platform for frontline workers, practitioners, and educators in community building to acquire knowledge and skills in building community resilience.

4.2 Leveraging Intermediaries' Local Expert Knowledge to Deliver Impact

While most corporates were hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic, many, especially the MNCs in China, increased their CSR funding at the global level toward fighting and preventing Covid-19. Most of this funding aimed at **building community resilience in post-pandemic societies**. About 90% of the

corporates that established partnerships with NPI during this time were keen to expand their community involvement to support vulnerable populations and invigorate community resilience.⁵³ NPI's in-depth local knowledge and expertise made it a critical partner for corporates looking to **co-create customised, value-aligned projects with agility**.

Lendlease (China): Post-Pandemic Community Resilience Rebuilding Project

Lendlease is an international property and infrastructure company with headquarters in Sydney, Australia. It is one of Australia's largest owners, operators, and developers of senior living communities.⁵⁴ Lendlease's first flagship Senior Living Development Project, Ardor Gardens (Yi Pu Hui), based in Shanghai's Qingpu District, offers healthy living options for senior residents after retirement.⁵⁵ An experienced operator in senior living communities internationally, Lendlease is strongly committed to building green living, with sustainability at the heart of its business strategy. Lendlease's sustainability framework supports the company purpose of **create(ing) value through places where communities thrive** via three imperatives: sustainable economic growth, vibrant and resilient communities, and a healthy planet and people.⁵⁶

Intermediaries Help Build Local Partnership to Assess Post-Pandemic Community Resilience

The Covid-19 pandemic brought Lendlease's attention to the need for better community resilience assessments to address local needs. In March 2020,

Lendlease Asia's regional headquarters allocated special funds towards relief projects for Covid-19 in China, Japan, Malaysia, and Singapore.⁵⁷ These aimed to provide a broad range of relief measures and capacity-building support for post-pandemic recovery, like community needs assessment for public health emergencies, to enhance community resilience.⁵⁸

Lendlease China dove into its special fund to assist in the post-pandemic community recovery measures in Qingpu, where its senior living project is located.⁵⁹ The challenge was to conduct due diligence to identify a nonprofit partner with **mission alignment and shared values** to deliver an impactful programme. Lendlease appreciated NPI's insight and local experience in community resilience and post-pandemic rebuilding, and quickly partnered with them in a shared desire to understand and rebuild community resilience post-pandemic, and improve the overall community resilience towards climate change and risks.⁶⁰

NPI drew on its long engagement with the community to offer strategic advice to Lendlease and worked intimately with it to iterate on project implementation to ensure alignment with Lendlease's sustainability framework. NPI also leveraged its local networks to connect Lendlease with Shanghai Philanthropic Foundation Qingpu Chapter and local community administrative office. On April 27, 2020, Lendlease launched its care packages for vulnerable families in Zhu Jia Jiao communities in Qingpu District.

At the time of writing, the second phase of rebuilding community resilience had been completed. This involved generating a comprehensive resilience assessment framework on the community level in China and surveying the

post-pandemic needs of local communities.⁶¹ The output aims to provide the framework to the industry as a community resilience assessment tool and offer practical guidance for post-pandemic community rebuilding. Throughout the process, NPI has mobilised multiple stakeholders to help realise Lendlease's vision to develop concrete plans to maximise impact.⁶² In the coming months, Lendlease will be working closely with NPI to improve the overall resilience of local communities and is looking forward to sharing the journey, growing this partnership, and gaining insight into how the corporates can support communities in developing resilience.

DBS China Ltd: DBS Stronger Together Fund

DBS China Ltd has been a partner of NPI since 2012. Its first project was to initiate the first **DBS Social Enterprise Forum** in Shanghai. In the past eight years, DBS China Ltd has continued to partner NPI to grow the ecosystem and has witnessed NPI's expansion, both into cities nationwide, and in scope, from social incubation to the creation of an impact fund. DBS has found NPI's **multifaceted intermediary services that empower and build community networks** valuable in co-creating social impact projects that extend its mission and values on sustainability.

Intermediaries Assist Corporates Establishing Wider Reach During Pandemic

When the pandemic hit, DBS China Ltd immediately allocated RMB 5 million (USD 700,000) to help communities hard hit by Covid-19. Through the **DBS Stronger Together Fund**, the bank provided millions of meals and care packs to affected individuals to soften the economic impact on vulnerable groups and empower those who lost jobs.⁶³ DBS China Ltd connected with NPI to collaborate on a post-pandemic food and care package delivery. Leveraging its nationwide community networks, NPI mobilised over 50 nonprofit organisations in 12 cities to participate in the initiative. NPI's speed in coming up with a suitable CSR programme that aligned with both parties' values was critical in ensuring rapid implementation.⁶⁴

On June 10, 2020, DBS China Ltd officially launched the **DBS Stronger Together Fund** partnering NPI and Green Food Bank network. Over 350 DBS China Ltd employees volunteered to deliver food packs to people in need.⁶⁵ Within 12 months, the Stronger Together Programme aims to mobilise 6,000+ volunteers to distribute care packs and provide capacity training for 70,000+ people who suffered from economic loss during the pandemic. DBS China Ltd will provide matching funds for donations raised for the Strong Together Programme on the Tencent Fundraising Platform.



5

How can Corporates Support Capacity Building for Intermediaries?

Field-building intermediaries like NPI that embrace the full spectrum of the continuum of capital and leverage the whole portfolio to support SPOs in breadth and scope are uncommon. The reality is that most intermediaries have remained small or worked in silos in South and Southeast Asia. However, as demonstrated in the cases above, where the social sector is still weak, social investors and corporates can bring about a significant change by investing in field-building intermediaries to develop the social economy. For example, the scaling of NPI's nonprofit incubation programme could not have been as successful in securing subsequent funding without the initial funding from corporates like DBS and Lenovo. By providing capital that was agile and flexible, they were able to amplify their own impact, meet the specific needs of NPI, and therefore, the broader social impact ecosystem.

The value for corporates to invest and support a field-building intermediary is multifaceted:

- 1 It helps bridge asymmetric resources and information between businesses, governments, nonprofits, and funders
- 2 It helps catalyse the growth of SPOs in a developing social economy
- 3 It helps coordinate a vibrant ecosystem

Below, we articulate ways in which corporates can accelerate the growth of intermediaries through different forms of support.

5.1 Help Intermediaries Achieve Financial Sustainability

Financial sustainability remains a primary concern for many intermediaries. Many intermediaries in Asia remain small in scope and scale, given that funding is scarce.⁶⁶ While they are critical in helping corporates craft more strategic decisions and SPOs to scale through their capacity-building support, they often struggle to be financially sustainable themselves. NPI was able to expand to become an ecosystem in itself because it proactively worked to secure **corporate support to diversify funding**. Reflecting on NPI's experience, field-building intermediaries of NPI's scale require a relatively longer start-up timeline, in addition to the high cost and risks of starting up.

New intermediaries of smaller scale still need to be more business viable to showcase their value and impact to corporates. The longer start-up timeline for field-building intermediaries and the financial viability for newer intermediaries pave the way for partnership opportunities with corporates. This collaboration allows intermediaries the chance to gain experience from corporates, tapping on their business expertise to learn the ropes of becoming self-sustainable.

Recommendation

Corporates can extend more financial support to diversify funding opportunities for intermediaries. They also need to be more risk-tolerant to adopt a long-range planning purview when supporting intermediaries. Supporting new intermediaries with patient capital could enhance the impact of these intermediaries in the long run by expanding their capacity to build the overall ecosystem.⁶⁷ The impact of corporate-giving could then be amplified and multiplied as intermediaries work across the ecosystem to grow the field.

5.2 Support Intermediaries to Develop Their Critical Role in Ecosystem Building

Intermediaries need capacity-building support to fully realise their potential as ecosystem builders. Intermediaries are essentially master trainers that need strong sector expertise and technical knowledge to effectively pass on the

knowledge and skills to corporates and SPOs. Many intermediaries in Asia are small in size and scope, focusing specifically on individual services such as incubation or acceleration, advisory services, SE certification, monitoring, and evaluation. While these functions are essential, corporates can **leverage their industry expertise** to support intermediaries to enhance their capacities and catalyse change. **Patient capital** can also help intermediaries develop their core capabilities over time.

Recommendation

Corporates can form a long-term strategic partnership with intermediaries of different growth stages to co-create new paradigms for impact. This strategic alliance can help both partners better understand the ecosystem and discover less funded impact areas needing more attention. This partnership built on mutual trust can help accelerate the ecosystem growth and impact for both supporting the development of SPOs and maximising corporate social impact.

5.3 Integrate Intermediaries in Corporate Social Impact Engagements to Achieve Multiplier Effect

Equal partnerships and strategic alliances with intermediaries can benefit corporates in developing innovative and coherent CSR strategies. Having intermediaries as a strategic partner with a holistic approach in their efforts to

achieve corporate social impact has a ripple effect in catalysing other forms of social impact. Intermediaries can advise on initiatives that move beyond traditional philanthropy or standard CSR programmes to include innovative sustainability programmes or introduce new business models that enhance corporates' operational effectiveness across the business value chain.⁶⁸

Recommendation

Corporates can integrate intermediaries across different stages of their social impact journey to leverage their strengths and build their capacity to address emerging gaps in the field. They can use different financing instruments and non-financial support to accelerate the growth of nascent intermediaries, such as through the models of corporate social accelerators. Explorations of corporate-intermediary partnership models could have mutual benefits for both parties to explore social innovations that have local relevance.

6

Now, Where Do You Start?

Here, we offer further readings and resources to help you think about how you can support and leverage intermediaries.

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Note on Methodology

This case study is based on primary and secondary research methods. We conducted extensive desktop research based on literature review in academic publications, news archival research, and analysis of NPI's publications on the website and social media over the years. To contextualise common CSR challenges in South and Southeast Asia, we identified common trends and challenges from a close reading of CSR reports and consulted in-house knowledge experts in AVPN. Based on these secondary research materials, we designed open-ended semi-structured questions for conducting in-depth interviews with key informants from NPI.

During the primary data collection phase, we conducted in-depth interviews with the founder and the partnership manager of NPI. Through NPI's introduction, we interviewed two of their corporate partners, DBS China Ltd and Lendlease, to include their collaboration in the study. Due to Covid-19, an actual field study could not be conducted.

We analysed interview transcripts and identified relevant themes and key objectives which we corroborated with data from secondary sources, including AVPN's past research publications. This was instrumental in surfacing common patterns in engagement between intermediaries and corporates.

Appendix

The Nonprofit Value Chain in China



Source: Adopted from NPI Slide Deck.

NPI Fact File

NAME OF ORGANIZATION	NONPROFIT INCUBATOR NPI (ENPAI)
Year Established	2006
Headquarter	Pudong, Shanghai
Founder and CEO	Zhao Lyu
Mission	2020 Establishing the Support System for Community Development. 2006 Supporting Social Innovation, Develop Nonprofit Human Capital.
Vision	2020 A Balanced, Trustful, Co-governed, Society. 2006 May all Chinese social innovators flourish in a policy-encouraging, resource-aligning, service-compatible, and supportive environment by the public.

Registration	Social Organisation (Nonprofit Organisation/NGO/Civil Non-Enterprise Unit)
Recognition	National 5A-class Social Organisation by Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau & National Excellence Social Organisation by the Ministry of Civil Affairs.
Theory of Change	Serving as the intermediary supporting platform organisation to better connect the resource providers (government/corporate) with the nonprofit service providers (NGO/individual) to catalyse impactful development of the social sector.
Number of Employees	320+
Local Offices	19+ (In the first and second-tier cities)
Projects Locations	50+
Portfolio Legal Entities	30+
Funding Sources	60% from Corporates and other Sources (including foundations) 40% from Government
Government Partners	600+ from the Province level down to street level (Province, City, District-level Government Nationwide)
Corporate Partners	50+ (*Majority from Fortune 500 large multinational companies and their corporate foundations. In recent years, the contribution from the domestic companies is on the rise.)
Number of Incubated Organizations	1,400+
Number of Organizations Supported	4,000+
Entrusted Community Innovation Space	40+ (200,000+ Square Meter)
Nationwide Community Coverage*	2000+

Source: Data collected from the NPI website, publications, and interviews with NPI. Community (shequ) is the base unit of urban administration and structure in China.

NPI Founder's Profile

Zhao Lyu is the founder and director of NPI. He graduated from Peking University in 1992 with a degree in Chinese Language and later obtained an EMBA from Peking University. Zhao previously worked as a journalist at Xinhua News Agency, as the chief editor of China Securities and Futures, and later as the chief editor of China Philanthropy Times. In 1999, he founded his own marketing communications company to provide consulting services and CSR advice for numerous local and multinational companies ranging from information technology to finance.⁶⁹ In 2003, he embarked on his career in charity and philanthropy, first working as the secretary general for the Committee on Corporate Citizenship under the Chinese Social Workers' Association.⁷⁰ With more in-depth engagement in the nonprofit field, he became the chief editor for the China Philanthropy Times in 2004. Zhao volunteered for the China NPO Information Network serving as the deputy director. Based in Beijing, the China NPO Information Network was the first capacity-building intermediary agency that has ever existed in China for the social sector.⁷¹

At the time, Shanghai was chosen as the pilot site to experiment with deepening social reform and was looking for partners for the pilot project. In this serendipitous timing, Zhao was sent to Shanghai to establish a local chapter for the China NPO Information Network. In Shanghai, Zhao found that to overcome the common challenges that many NGOs face, namely the resource constraint and legal registration, the model of business incubator that assists the growth of startups could be replicated in the nonprofit field to grow the social sector. With the initial funding raised from the World Bank,

Narada Foundation and Ford Foundation, the head of the Civil Affairs Bureau in Pudong New District invited Zhao to register NPI with an entrusted pro bono co-working space. This marked the founding of NPI in 2006.

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