

Building a strong and effective animal protection movement: the importance of capacity building programmes in Asia

**Pei Su, Executive Director and Deepashree Balaram, Programme Director
ACTAsia for Animals**

Asia is the world's most populous continent. Industrialised animal use is escalating here. However, animal protection is a relatively new concept, and there are very few animal protectionists tackling a multitude of issues. They face many more challenges than their colleagues in countries where animal protection has become an established and organised sector. These challenges include social isolation and lack of support in some cultural contexts, severely constricted civic freedom in some countries, lack of funding and inability to professionalise their work through paid human resources.

We believe that a strong animal protection movement has to start with a strong foundation for the individuals and groups within the movement. Unfortunately, in most Asian countries (not to mention in other parts of the world), what usually happens is that people are thrown in at the deep end when they start working for animals. They have to know about welfare issues related to companion animals, farm animals, animals in entertainment, animals in research, wildlife problems, etc. – and they have to fight to stop this abuse. They have to know how to pull together effective campaigns, convince people to give them funds for their work, rescue and re-home animals, manage projects and budgets, lobby law makers, understand legislation, create public awareness, treat sick animals – the list goes on.

Any one of the issues from the above list could take years for someone to develop enough expertise to make a difference – people in the corporate world, for example, may get a couple of degrees, and years of training and experience before they have to deal with anything comparable; people in the animal protection world don't have that luxury.

It is the animals who pay a heavy price for this lack of knowledge and experience. How many of you find yourselves working day after day on the same issues, with no light at the end of the tunnel? How many of you have created change in your communities, only to find that a sudden crisis in public health has wiped away all your years of work? How many of you have lost intelligent, committed people because they just couldn't handle the stress and frustration any more?

There are only a few of us – and many animal exploiters. We not only have to deal with cruel and thoughtless individuals – we are up against industrialised animal abuse such as factory farming and vivisection, exported from the west to Asian countries to take advantage of cheaper costs and weaker (or non-existent) laws.

Some of you may have realised, which is true, that we are building up experience as we do our jobs – some of the Asian animal groups are among the best in the world. However, we could be so much more effective, and spend more time on things that will make a difference in the long term, if we were helped from the beginning, not just with money, but with proper training, resources and the experiences of others in the field.

ACTAsia believes that we can create lasting, positive social change – and let's be clear here – animal protection is about changing society, and it is as legitimate a social movement as child welfare or women's rights. And it is up to us to see ourselves as agents of such change, and convey this message to others, instead of being marginalised as the people who take away the problem so that the rest of society doesn't have to deal with it. Unfortunately, many animal groups see themselves specifically as promoters of kindness to animals or opponents of animal cruelty, and do not see themselves as agents of social change. And this affects our effectiveness within our communities.

Long term changes will only happen in a country if the groups within it are working towards this change, and one of the most effective things that anyone can do to help them is to build their capacity to tackle all the problems they face, so that they have the best tools possible in the fight to help animals. This is why we have made capacity building of local groups the biggest part of our work.

Although everyone agrees that capacity building is important, most groups are so busy with all their work that they find it impossible to incorporate it into their lives, and it remains relegated to the 'nice-to-have' category. Our view is that it needs to be pushed up to the 'must-have' category for real change to occur for the animals.

Many groups do not actually understand what capacity building means or how much time and effort will need to be invested to undertake the task, although this phrase is used in most sectors nowadays. So what is capacity building? There are a lot of definitions around, and we like this really simple one: *Actions that improve a non-profit organisation's effectiveness.* (From *Investing in Capacity Building* by Barbara Blumenthal).

Capacity building efforts can cover a broad range of activities, both formal and informal. ACTAsia has been working in China for the last couple of years, mostly focusing on capacity building for the local groups. Examining and analysing each group's needs and reflecting on the challenges they face and how to overcome them are crucial factors to ensure that capacity building is started in the right way.

Our methods:

- Interactive workshops and distribution of information
- Advice and support of local groups, including mentoring and bringing in external experts
- Working together with local groups on selected projects

We use a combination of these methods – for some issues we only need to provide information, for example, when talking about the facts of animal abuse; for others, such as project management, we use a more hands-on interactive approach, even working with certain groups through the entire project so that they will gain experience and confidence of running an effective project.

Participants at our workshops are provided with knowledge on different animal protection issues. We feel that it is best to go in-depth into one issue at a time, and make the workshops as interactive as possible, so that learning is not a one-way process from trainer to student.

Also, at the workshops, we work on skills needed by animal protectionists – for example, we covered project management at one workshop, and campaign planning at another.

We continue to work with a few of the groups after the workshops on selected projects, and use these projects to increase their knowledge of the issue and help them to gain more experience in developing the skills they have learned at our workshops.

We also source, modify and translate relevant resources from other countries, and distribute them to the groups. Apart from these capacity building areas, we also try to help groups to manage their stress and increase their sense of wellbeing. It is important to address these issues to help individuals to continue over the long term in animal protection.

A group we work with was one of the first animal groups to receive funding from a Chinese municipal government to prevent rabies and to work on stray animal control. They were not clear about how they could best use this funding to improve animal welfare, and did not have the necessary skills to create a long term fully rounded programme with the different elements needed. Following discussions with them we suggested that they focus on increasing neutering awareness, acceptance and rates for owned animals (dogs and cats) in their city. They initially just wanted to neuter animals, but as we discovered during the course of our talks, public acceptance of neutering was absent, and this would be a big obstacle to creating a successful neutering programme. They also found it difficult to reach agreement among themselves on the best way to go forward, and we had to work with them to enable them to reach a consensus. We also helped them in the following ways:

1. We helped them to decide on the first event that they wanted to do while we were available in China. We then spoke at this event which was organised to increase awareness and acceptance of neutering among their supporters. Participants were given free neutering vouchers which could be taken to participating vets (who collaborate with this group) to get their animal neutered. As a result of the event people who wanted to promote neutering in their communities have asked this group for help. The group also learned about how to plan an effective event.
2. We worked with them to decide the goals, objectives and target audience for this programme. They decided that they wanted to promote neutering of owned animals and set up a low cost neutering programme in their city.
3. They used the project plan template that had been used at our workshop to help them to create their plan, and also used the concepts that had been discussed in the project management sessions of our workshop. We then helped them to refine the plan.
4. They had to move their shelter all of a sudden – with our help (and external expertise that we brought in) they are in the process of creating an animal-friendly shelter with limited resources, one that can be used as a model for other groups in China.
5. This group is also focusing now on public awareness and media activities, something they had never considered essential before we started working with them.

ACTAsia will continue to mentor them and provide support during these activities.

Another group we work with has come up with innovative ways of rehoming animals and raising awareness about cat protection issues. The organisation does excellent work, but as they take on many issues and plan a lot of activities they often find it difficult to control the workload. Also, development of the organisation and working plans depends heavily on a few individuals, particularly the founder.

Some of their main issues:

- Key members do not take responsibility for their projects, and this leads to lower motivation and commitment
- Many of the ideas are generated by the leader of the group, and these are not understood properly and therefore not implemented properly by other members
- Their activities cover such a wide range that they end each year without accomplishing everything that they had planned to do
- None of the objectives are prioritised, which makes it difficult to focus on the most important issues

Following project management sessions at our workshop and discussions with their key people, we worked with them right from developing their goals to helping them to create a feasible working plan. We are now working with them to help them to implement their projects, reinforcing everything learnt so far so that they will be more confident about planning and implementing their work. For example, one of their priorities is neutering, and visits to vets who have supported them show that the vets need more training on neutering/early age neutering techniques. We are aiming to have veterinary training organised in the beginning of 2009, and they are using this opportunity to forge links with the local veterinary association, and expand a low cost neutering scheme with animal-friendly vets. They have also dropped some of their activities which took large amounts of time but were not very effective, and are building others that we identified together as important to make long term changes for cats in their city.

Animal groups in China tend to work in isolation, and usually only share their experiences through opportunities organised by international groups. Learning from each other's successful projects and working methods is the best way for Chinese animal groups to improve rapidly. We are helping to develop this network, and the groups have benefited so far from the following activities:

The head of the network co-organised ACTAsia's recent workshop, and this was a good starting point for a network, as a forum will be set up for workshop participants, and can form the foundation of the network.

ACTAsia has identified some of the needs for animal groups on the ground and has provided practical and educational materials for them through the network.

We have been made aware that in India, the newly-formed Federation of Indian Animal Protection Organisations is also planning to work on capacity building of groups, with a priority on developing skills in public awareness to help people accept the animals we see around us every day. It is very encouraging to all of us to hear about initiatives like this in other Asian countries.

Although developing a capacity building programme is extremely important, we need to be aware that it can take quite a lot of time before results are seen. It isn't just a question of imparting knowledge – this knowledge needs to be reinforced, and individuals need to be nurtured as they start working towards more effective programmes. This can be very time consuming, but also extremely rewarding. If you decide to start a programme, these are some of the areas you may wish to consider:

1. Knowledge of the animal protection issues related to different species and uses, such as companion animals, farm animals, animals used in research, and animals used in entertainment.
2. Skills related to the process of creating change, such as lobbying, project management, campaign planning, organisational development and fundraising.
3. Individual well-being and stress management

There is a great need for more capacity building work in Asian countries. Anyone can start on this work, within their organisation or with others, by identifying the main needs of the people they would like to help and identifying the people who would be able to help them with these needs. We already have a wealth of experience and skills within our countries, both within our field and outside. Bring people together to learn from external experts and each other, using methods that work in that situation. It would definitely make a big difference in the way we work, and ultimately make a huge difference to the lives of the animals we are all trying to protect.

ACTAsia for Animals (www.actasia.org, info@actasia.org) is a registered charity in the UK. ACTAsia was set up in 2006 by experienced animal protectionists to develop and promote sustainable and professional animal protection in Asia. We aim to provide knowledge, tools and platforms for Asian animal protectionists and groups, through training, mentoring and networking. We focus on working with individual animal protectionists and grassroots animal organisations, to help them to raise their effectiveness and standards, in order to achieve lasting positive social change.