

# **Organizing Sustainable Development in Tibetan Areas of China**

**March 19, 2004**

**Daniel Miller**

Thank you very much. I am grateful to the Congressional-Executive Commission on China for giving me the opportunity to speak today. This roundtable on development projects in the Tibetan areas of China is an important topic. I am especially pleased with the subtitle of the roundtable on articulating clear goals and achieving sustainable results. As a development specialist, I believe that development efforts in Tibetan areas of China, in order to be successful, need to give much greater attention to formulating explicit goals and objectives and ensuring that results are attained and that they are sustained.

As a bit of background let me say that I have spent part of every year for the last 16 years working in Tibetan areas of China. In the beginning, I conducted research on rangelands, wildlife and nomads and later was involved in designing and implementing wildlife conservation and rural development projects for a variety of bilateral and multilateral organizations, and NGOs. At last count, I have made 35 trips to Tibetan areas in western China. I have been fortunate to have been able to visit and work in numerous areas, including the remote Chang Tang region in the northern Tibetan Autonomous Region and western Qinghai Province, the central valleys of the TAR, eastern Qinghai Province, and the Tibetan areas of Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan Provinces.

My work in Tibetan areas of China was preceded by many years working with Tibetan refugees and Tibetan-speaking herders and farmers in Nepal and Bhutan. I also speak Tibetan. I admit I have trouble carrying on a political or philosophical conversation in Tibetan – as I do in English – but I can easily converse in Tibetan with Tibetan farmers and nomads about agriculture, livestock and rangeland management.

In the short time I have to talk, I would like to focus on agricultural development in the Tibetan areas of China and, more specifically, on livestock development for Tibetan nomads and farmers, which happens to be my area of expertise.

Of the Tibetan population in China of about 5 million people, almost 2 million Tibetans are nomads who make their living primarily from animal husbandry. Another 2 and ½ million people are agro-pastoralists, who combine both cropping and livestock raising for their livelihoods. As such, livestock development and the management of the rangeland resources is fundamental to the future development of the majority of the Tibetan people.

Rangelands of the Tibetan Plateau encompass about 1.65 million square kilometers, an area slightly larger than the country of Mongolia – or about 2 and ½ times the size of the state of Texas. Thus, the Tibetan rangeland environment is one of the world's largest rangeland landscapes. It is also one of the earth's most important ecosystems as it contains the headwaters environment for many of Asia's major rivers and has been identified as one of the world's priority areas for conservation of biodiversity. Despite its vast extent, the global significance of its biodiversity, the regional importance of its watersheds, and the millions of Tibetan nomads and farmers who are dependent on the rangelands, they have not been given the consideration they deserve.

In the last 20 years, China has achieved remarkable agricultural and rural growth, greatly reduced poverty and addressed many environmental and natural resource degradation problems. In many of the Tibetan

areas, however, broad-based rural economic growth has not been very significant yet. Poverty is still pervasive and inhibits the government's and rural communities efforts to create economic opportunities. Tackling poverty in the Tibetan areas is also constrained because of the poor understanding of the nature of poverty and the lack of reliable information about improved farming systems and more appropriate pastoral production practices. Some of these aspects on the nature of poverty among Tibetan nomads are dealt with in more detail in my prepared statement.

To date, most Tibetan farmers and nomads have not participated fully in the assessment, planning and implementation of development programs and policies that affect their lives. Government development programs have generally taken a top-down approach and, despite their good intentions, have often been hampered because Tibetan farmers and nomads themselves were not involved in the design and implementation of activities and by faulty assumptions about poverty and Tibetan's agricultural and livestock production practices.

In addressing poverty and implementing rural development in Tibetan areas, one is faced with problems of two production systems. On the one hand, there is the traditional agricultural and pastoral production systems, which can be seen as an evolutionary response to environmental limitations; it is a pattern for survival, which has proved successful. On the other hand, there is also another system, which is a new pattern for survival and increased production, based on the technical rationale brought in from outside but not yet adjusted to social factors and subjected to the test of time; its technical innovations are promoted by development projects and technical specialists. Dealing with problems, which relate to the entire system, including the interaction of old and new strategies will require much more careful analysis when planning development in Tibetan areas. Let me add here, that I have been amazed at the changes I have seen taking place in just a few year in many of the nomad areas in China where rangelands are being privatized and fenced and nomads are encouraged to settle down. It certainly is a dynamic environment.

Rural development experience internationally, and elsewhere in China, demonstrates the benefits of adopting an integrated approach to tackling poverty – an approach that involves social and economic development as well as environmental management. An emphasis on economic growth within a community-based integrated development model has the greatest promise for a multiplier effect in reducing poverty in Tibetan areas. It addresses the needs of Tibetans in local communities and the opportunities that exist for increasing incomes and improving livelihoods.

The lack of markets of livestock and agricultural products, of agro-processing that adds significant value, and of financial services are important contributors to the environmental, economic and social problems afflicting Tibetan areas. Development of integrated markets for agricultural and livestock products that increase the flow of products and price signals that reward higher quality is essential to adding economic value, reducing the negative impacts of overgrazing and environmental degradation, and improving the livelihoods of farmers and nomads. Development of demand-based agricultural processing enterprises that add significant value to agricultural and natural resource products means a greater emphasis on quality rather than quantity. It also underscores the importance of providing increased alternative opportunities for employment and income for Tibetan farmers and herders.

Reducing poverty and promoting sustainable development in Tibetan areas requires expanding the income base for Tibetans. The economic base of the majority of Tibetan people is primarily agriculture and animal husbandry is the dominant agricultural activity across much of the Tibetan plateau. Therefore, improvements in livestock production and animal husbandry practices, in both agricultural and nomadic areas, hold the potential for stimulating economic growth. Yet, when we look at the types of development projects that are being implemented by most American-based NGOs in Tibetan areas there is surprisingly little attention being paid to livestock development.

The key issues for sustainable development in the Tibetan pastoral areas to be resolved are: (1) widespread poverty; (2) rangeland degradation; (3) unsustainable livestock production practices; (4) poor market development; (5) weak community participation; and (6) lack of integration in addressing the problems. The development challenge is determining how to target funding better to address these issues and to ensure that resources allocated for development actually reaches the Tibetan farmers and nomads.

I would now like to go back to the subtitle of this roundtable: articulating clear goals and achieving sustainable results. Having been involved in rural development for many years, I firmly believe that clear objectives and strong commitment drive successful projects. There are numerous US-based NGOs working in Tibetan areas of China, a number of them with funding from the US Government. NGOs are widely perceived by the public as more effective than larger donors at reaching local people. Typically, NGOs operate small-scale, community-based projects.

Having worked for both NGOs and larger multilateral and bilateral development organizations, I think the development planning process that larger development organizations like USAID, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the World Bank embrace – tools such as results-based management and logical frameworks -- are very valuable and could help NGOs be more strategic and effective in their work in Tibetan areas. These tools – and there are numerous training programs and manuals on them -- assist you to clearly define goals, development objectives, outputs and activities. It really doesn't matter if you are designing a large \$50 million project or a small, \$50,000 project – the process is the same.

What is important is that the proper analysis is carried out, outputs and activities are clearly defined, performance indicators are defined, and a monitoring and evaluation system is designed. Roles and responsibilities of different actors also need to be defined and a work plan schedule developed. Since funding is limited, development organizations also need to focus on those activities that provide the greatest return on investment. Economic analysis has to play an important role in identifying costs, benefits and risks and in evaluating design alternatives during project planning.

Defining development goals and objectives and achieving sustainable results in Tibetan areas will require that those organizations currently working there, and those desiring to work there in the future, learn to use these development tools that have proven to be useful.

With respect to sustainability, the basic objective for sustainability is to institutionalize the project/program outcomes in partner organizations. This requires permanent changes in institutional knowledge, processes, and systems. Having a project sustainability strategy helps ensure that project strategies, management structures and processes foster stakeholder participation, capacity building and ownership of results. The likelihood of sustainability is increased when local partners are involved in decision-making. When they participate in decision making about the use of resources, they are building their capacity to assess needs, formulate solutions, and ensure their effective implementation.

The US Government Agency I work for, USAID, has considerable experience and lessons learned about pastoral development that is relevant to Tibetan nomadic areas. For example, the Global Livestock Collaborative Research Support Program has worked with pastoralists in South America, East Africa, and Central Asia. Many of the approaches from these activities could be applied to Tibet. USAID also has been working with nomads in Mongolia, forming herder groups and working with herders to develop rangeland management plans and improving the business of herding that is relevant to Tibetan pastoral areas. A number of other bilateral and multilateral organizations have range and livestock development projects in Inner Mongolia, Gansu, and Xinjiang regions of China and have valuable lessons-learned on organizing pastoral development.

In addition, a Sino-US Center for Grazingland Excellence was recently established in Gansu Province of China that will provide opportunities for American scientists to work with scientists from universities throughout Western China, including the Tibetan Autonomous Region, on rangeland and pastoral development related research. I see this as an excellent opportunity for US-based NGOs working in Tibetan areas to team up with American and Chinese scientists (including Tibetans and Mongolians) to design long-term research efforts to help solve many pastoral development related issues.

There is a great need for more multidisciplinary research that brings together the expertise of social scientists, ecologists, agronomists, economists, and pastoral specialists to develop a better understanding of the nature of poverty and existing agricultural and pastoral production practices among Tibetan farmers and nomads. Research also needs to be more participatory and farmers and herders need to play a larger role in setting research priorities and in determining the merits of research findings.

Research efforts need to be directed towards understanding current nomadic pastoral production and farming systems and how they are changing and adapting to development influences. Practices vary considerably across the Tibetan areas and these differences need to be analyzed. How do increasing demands for livestock and agricultural products in the market place affect future agricultural and livestock sales? What constraints and opportunities for improving production are recognized by the farmers and nomads themselves? What forms of social organization exist for managing livestock and rangelands? How have these practices changed in recent years and what are the implications of these transformations? Answers to these and related questions will help unravel many of the complexities of current agricultural and pastoral production systems, of which we still know so little about, and will help us to better plan future interventions.

The crucial problem now facing agricultural and livestock development in Tibetan areas appears to be organizational and behavioral, rather than technical. That is to say, what social forms of production are likely to be viable in the changed socio-economic situation that now faces most rural Tibetans? Analyses of the socio-economic processes at work are a key challenge for development workers.

Finally, let me conclude by saying that the challenges facing development in the Tibetan areas of China are considerable. Opportunities do exist, however, for improving the livelihoods of Tibetans. To be successful, development projects need to develop a better understanding of the ecosystems and agricultural and pastoral production systems, greater appreciation for Tibetan nomads and farmers and their way of life, and consideration of new information and ideas. There are no simple solutions. Due to the multifaceted dimensions of the development problems, actions will need to be taken on several levels: at the central policy level, at the university and research level, at the county and township level, and at the nomad and farmer level. Promoting more sustainable development in Tibetan areas will require policies and approaches that integrate ecological principles regulating ecosystem functions with the economic principles governing agricultural and livestock production and general economic development processes.