

**Political Change in China?**  
**Public Participation and Local Governance Reforms**  
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**“Rural Government Reform and the People”**

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Over the past four years, with private and US government funds, The Asia Foundation has implemented a series of programs in the rural areas of China which aim to improve rural governance and explore solutions to reconcile the disputes between the farmers and local governments, especially at the township level. The program results have been the basis for policy recommendations which Foundation partners have submitted to the Chinese central government over the past two years.

Program summaries

The programs are designed to explore the causes of conflict and how local initiatives and citizen participation can help to solve disputes through specific activities:

- **Survey the main causes of conflict between farmers and local government officials**  
This program was implemented before the Chinese government started to rescind the agricultural tax, which alleviated many of the frustrations expressed by the farmers described below.

-Tax/fee collection causes the most common and severe conflicts. The most common answer to the question of how to improve the cadre-farmer relationship is “stop collecting taxes and fees.”

-Cadre corruption has been, and continues to be, one of foremost frustrations among farmers.

-Farmers often complain of inadequate provision of public services, such as low quality or high cost in the construction of roads, primary schools, electricity network and water conservancy projects.

-The government-mandated production of specific crops also aggravates farmers. For example, farmers intending to grow grain may be forced to grow watermelon. There have been cases when farmers destroy seedlings to avoid cultivating crops they do not want to grow.

Conflicts are also caused by failure to follow the procedure in village elections or between the new and retiring committee directors and members. Many farmers complain that the township Party Secretaries manipulate the selection of candidates and the selection process is not transparent

- **Explore organized mechanisms for farmers for fundraising and management of public services**  
The program provided a small fund to two villages where neither the Party branch nor village committee was functioning properly, to build a road and a small irrigation canal. Over the course of the program, the program team helped farmers develop a set of simple rules and procedures for electing the management team, raising funds from the farmers, mobilizing free labor from the village, and maintaining transparent accounting books. This project serves to illustrate to the local government that conflicts can be reduced if the government is accountable in providing quality public services and maintaining transparency.
- **Train farmer representatives (*nengren*)**  
In this program, some 700 farmers and 100 township employees joined in the training. Training courses are provided for farmer delegates to the local people’s congress, farmers who handle complaints and petitions among their peers, and farmer activists to provide them with basic knowledge regarding the laws, regulations, policies and their responsibilities to supervise the government. The training encourages these groups to observe relevant laws when they complain or

petition the government, rather than inciting violence. Local government employees are also recruited to the training courses where they and farmers improve mutual understanding and interactions.

As part of the program, a pilot program was run to assess the performance of the government employees. Twenty farmer representatives were recruited to take part in the assessment. This part of the program introduces and tests an instrument which the farmers can supervise the local government staff. The hypothesis is that government staff will try not to frustrate the farmers if farmers are allowed to participate in performance reviews, which is a major indicator for the staff's promotion and higher salary levels.

- **Survey types of existing farmers' associations**

This survey, conducted in 12 provinces in 2004, reveals that there are four types of farmers' associations. Some of them have been allowed to register with the local government, but the majority must struggle to survive. The key members of the association see themselves as the spokesmen of the farmers. The four types of farmers' associations are:

- Associations that help farmers better understand laws and policies. They also help farmers protect their rights by writing complaint letters to higher level government.
- Associations that aim to protect farmers' rights. Some of them are well organized and have by-laws. The main purpose of these associations is to represent farmers in the protests to "alleviate burdens."
- Associations that are established to help farmers improve production.
- Associations that are established for specific purposes; for example, when relocated farmers lose their land but receive minimum compensation.

- **Establish farmers' production cooperatives**

Although the program technically aims to assist farmers in setting up production cooperatives, the ultimate goal is to help farmers protect their rights. Three farmers' cooperatives have been set up with the assistance of the program team.

- **Establish community-based service organizations**

An association for the senior citizens has been set up with the help of the assistance. The program is still going on.

The last two projects are both pilot programs that explore patterns of farmers' organizations. They help farmers initiate coordinated production or provide services that local governments fails to provide. It will take considerable time for such organizations to expand, and show widespread impact of the program.

## Observations

- Most of the township governments are challenged with shortage of revenue. Roughly 70 percent of them are in debt. Some of them cannot even pay their staff salaries for periods of three to six months. Such financial shortages have been intensified by the retraction of agricultural tax. Yet, each township government is a parallel structure of the higher levels of government, and therefore tends to be overstaffed. The primary job of the township government becomes survival rather than running the township. Even though the central government has instructed that no extra levies be imposed on farmers after the agricultural tax is totally rescinded in 2006, township government will have to refer to collecting some type of fee or tax to maintain their revenue, and their effort to impose new types of fees may cause a new round of conflicts with farmers. Regardless, they will have no time or energy to improve local governance.
- Township governments have lost their sense of direction. They carry huge debt loads, yet while they realize problem issues, such as the inefficiency of an overstaffed government, there is no way the

system can be streamlined. They now rely totally on the allocation of budgets from the county government because they have very limited income resources. Township officials are unsure as to what policies the central government will formulate regarding the future of township government.

- Township governments tend to be selective when democracy is introduced in the villages. The government cadres in general do not believe that farmers are educated enough to exercise their rights within a democratic system. However, they refer to democratic means when they believe such an effort can prevent or reconcile conflicts that may arise. Farmers, on the other hand, do not show intense interest in reforming the township government except for a few activists or those whose rights and interests have been disrupted by the township government. Most of the farmers tend to be satisfied so long as they are left alone without being bothered with taxes or fees, and cadres remain impartial over matters like land and public facilities, and are not involved in corruption.

### Conclusions

- No drastic political reform should be expected in the near future as too many interconnected issues are involved. Streamlining of the township government would mean a large number of employees need to be laid off. Without well conceived or coordinated reemployment schemes, they may join farmers on petition trips.
- Rural governance can only be improved within the current political framework by strengthening the measures to monitor government by the local congress and farmers' organizations.
- Chinese rural governments have no impetus to initiate their own reform, even though there is significant demand for reform from individuals within the local government. Reform can only be initiated by outside pressure, namely from farmers.
- The central government's current rural policies cannot solve the fundamental problem of governance in the rural areas. They may pacify farmers for certain periods, but they do not offer long term solutions. Given all the problems that the township government faces, and the fact that most of them are not fully functioning, the policies may not be effectively implemented. Without redefinition of township government's functions or thorough reform, sound rural governance may not be possible.