

**TGAP**FORUM  
TIBET GOVERNANCE AND PRACTICE

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西藏治理与实践论坛

Advancing new insights on the challenges of governance in contemporary Tibet



# Conservation, Resource Management and Local Governance in Tibet: Challenges and Prospects in Policy Perspective

## Research Briefing

Harvard Center Shanghai

August 10-12, 2013

PRC Institutional Host



DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH CENTER OF THE STATE COUNCIL  
Institute of Ethnic Minority Groups

Convening Partners

Institute for Global and  
International Studies  
THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY



# Conservation, Resource Management and Local Governance in Tibet:

## Challenges and Prospects in Policy Perspective

### About TGAP

The Tibet Governance and Practice Forum is an annual international conference and policy workshop that advances knowledge and understanding of governance challenges in Tibet. As a global platform for comparative research on policy issues in Tibet, the TGAP Forum convenes scholars, researchers and practitioners in a cross-disciplinary discussion of key issues shaping the region. During the three-day forum in August 2013, the TGAP explored new ideas, innovative approaches, policy suggestions, and global insights on the issue of environmental conservation and resource management in Tibet.

The TGAP Forum was held at the Harvard Shanghai Center on **Conservation, Resource Management and Local Governance in Tibet: Challenges and Prospects in Policy Perspective**. This international conference and policy research workshop was hosted by the Institute for Ethnic Minority Groups of the State Council's Development Research Center, and co-convened by Machik, the Institute for Global Engagement, the Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief, George Washington University's Institute for Global and International Studies, and Harvard University's Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies. Researchers and scholars from eight countries and regions of North America, Europe, and China were convened in a cross-disciplinary discussion of conservation, resource management and practice in Tibet.

The Forum was premised on the concept of the Tibetan plateau as the "Third Pole," a natural ecosystem and biosphere in which the highest rates of climate change have been documented. Through the lens of the natural sciences, geography as well as applied economics and development studies, the participants of the 2013 TGAP Forum examined the factors conditioning the dynamics of environment, communities and local governance.



The papers and presentations addressed the challenges and implications of climate change, watershed management, land use, rangeland practices, and the marketization of natural resources. The TGAP Forum convened ecology scientists, geographers, applied economists and development specialists in a dialogue on the policy issues raised by these challenges. The Forum provided a platform for leading Tibetan conservationists, environmental educators and other community leaders from inside Tibet to present their work and ideas for reform on conservation and resource management issues in local communities.

## Research Briefing TGAP Forum 2013

The TGAP Forum deliberated current state policies and strategic principles in advancing what has been called “ecological civilization” on the Tibetan plateau. It recognized the achievements of these policies and principles in promoting environmental protection while providing a platform for the discussion of shortcomings and challenges as well. The conference placed special emphasis on both the importance of traditional cultural concepts of ecology as well as the participation of local community in conservation practices. It also pointed out the ecological crisis on the Tibetan plateau resulting from global climate change, social changes and institutional competition.



*Yechin, Party Branch Secretary, Ganda Village, Jyeku, Yushu Prefecture, Qinghai (Left) Hashi Tashi Dorje, Secretary General, Snowland Great Rivers Environmental Protection Association, Yushu Prefecture, Qinghai (Right)*

One key focus of discussions was the development of policies on grassland management since the reform period. The conference pointed out the shortcomings and defects of policies such as Pasture Contract System, Return Pasture to Grassland and Grassland Ecology Conservation Reward System. These policy challenges were due not only to the “one size fits all” approach, but also to the inadequate implementation of policies and regulations. Using the case studies of the Return Pasture to Grassland project and Grass-Livestock Balance Reward policy in the Nagchu area of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), participants demonstrated the institutional challenges in environmental conservation and resource management facing the Tibetan plateau. It was pointed out that the

core drive for local authorities and officials at different levels of government to implement policies was the pressure from higher-level authorities rather than the need to effectively solve the problems which those policies were meant to address. This allowed for impractical and ineffective policies to continue, while information reflecting the true situation on the ground could not flow upward, thus precluding any possibility of improvement or revision of policies.

There was a strong consensus at the forum that environmental conservation on the Tibetan plateau is of national and global common interest. The legislation for Tibetan plateau ecological compensation mechanism was determined to be the best guarantee for environmental conservation on the plateau. The ongoing ecological crisis on the plateau demonstrates that reckless exploitation of natural resources has resulted in an unprecedented destruction of the Tibetan environment. The establishment of an ecological compensation system has thus become urgent.

The importance of environmental conservation to national interests was signaled by the strategic plan formulated to advance the so-called ecological civilization at the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The development of the ecological compensation mechanism for the Tibetan plateau should thus be one of the specific projects through which to implement this goal of advancing ecological civilization.



*Harvard Center Shanghai*

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Participants shared a strong concern about the issue of ecological resettlement. Based on the assessments presented at the conference, the participants concluded that the disadvantages of the ecological resettlement have outweighed its benefits. Studies conducted by social scientists and rangeland specialists have found that reducing the number of livestock did not reduce pressure on the grasslands. Complete prohibition of grazing has also been shown to be not conducive to the healthy regeneration of the grassland ecosystem.



*Zhao Shuqing, Director, IEMG, Development Research Center, State Council*

These scientific findings found unanimous agreement from the community-based conservationists and practitioners at the forum. Based on traditional knowledge of ecological systems on the grasslands and accumulated experience from years of conservation practice, the local practitioners attested to the vital and essential role of the herders and the significance of Tibetan pastoral culture in the grassland ecology. The local conservation experts also objected to the policies of campaign-style migration and the reduction of livestock. They found that ecological migration did not address the core issues of the environmental protection and the improvement of livelihoods for pastoralists. It was notable that in project implementation, there was consistently an overemphasis on technological intervention and the completion of certain targeted projects.

In one sense, ecological resettlement was found to promote the urbanization of the

Tibetan population. But the migrants did not acquire formal urban residence and identity. Instead, the resettled Tibetans suffered from low employment and mainly relied on the government ecological subsidies for their survival. Those unemployed and undocumented migrants found it difficult to break from the vicious cycle of “migration, poverty and refuge.” The traditional social structure had collapsed while the resettled herders have yet to build an alternative basis for community life. Social security systems have not been expanded to cover resettlement sites. Pastoral culture has been displaced by urban life, leaving people feeling insecure and unstable as a host of new social problems emerge. In most of the resettled communities, a cultural ecology has yet to be established. Faith and spiritual life have been disregarded.

The forum also examined the effectiveness of community-based models of environmental conservation. Through case studies, local community leaders demonstrated that participatory models of environmental conservation represented a practical and well-grounded systematic approach, one that is supported by faith and cultural ecological world-views. Community-based models of environmental conservation are thus effective in unique ways. However, due to the rigid prioritization of the principle of maintaining stability in Tibet, community-based conservation activities led by civil society organizations are often obstructed. Community-based environmental protection activities are regarded as sensitive in the Tibetan, and they rarely receive the support of the local authorities.



*Li Hongjie, Associate Professor, Minzu Research Center, State Ethnic Affairs Commission*

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The experts of the TGAP Forum unanimously agreed that the involvement of local herders and farmers in community-based conservation is important because it addresses key problems in the development of Tibet, including cultural inheritance, economic development, and environmental conservation. In order to encourage the participation of farmers and nomads, and to ensure the effectiveness of environmental governance, there is an urgent need to conduct research on how to promote constructive interaction between local authorities and farmers and nomads, as well as community elites such as village officials, monks and the business sector.



*Sonam Wanggye, Faculty, Qinghai Provincial Party School*

The case of Tibet shares similarities with other regions within the People's Republic of China. The experience and lessons drawn from the challenges of Tibetan governance will serve as a pioneering reference for ecological conservation and rural governance in China as such.

Based on findings above, TGAP Forum proposed the following policy recommendations:

### **Legal Reform, Enhanced Laws and Institutional Support**

The TGAP Forum identified legal reform as the highest priority for ecological conservation on the Tibetan plateau. Based on the current ecological situation of Tibet, the PRC **Ecological Compensation Act** must be formulated, and the **PRC Grassland Law** and the **Environmental Conservation Law** must be revised and improved. Payment transfer capacity of the central government should also be in-

creased. The financial distribution system and ecological compensation mechanism should be sustainable. A mechanism needs to be set up to allow authorities to purchase public products, such as environmental and charitable service from NGOs or governments.

New legislation should prohibit the reclamation of farmland in the Sanjiangyuan area, while current farmland should be restored to grassland. The development of high-polluting industries and the construction of dams on major rivers should be banned through legislation and administrative measures. There should also be policy or system innovation, such as, for example, putting in measures to enable herders to join businesses by way of holding stocks. They should also be able to establish joint-equity companies or co-operatives. Market behavior in Tibet should be decreased or restrained in the fields such as environment conservation, migration and urbanization. The market economy is not a panacea and unlimited expansion of capital should be restricted.



*Jin Wei, Professor, Ethnic and Religious Studies, Central Party School*

### **Local Herders as Primary Participants and Stakeholders**

Effective environmental conservation and resources management requires the participation of local communities in the decision-making process. The government and local officials need to listen carefully to local residents and learn from their perspectives on the environment and their experience in the use of natural resources. This process and its result may conflict with the immediate interests of local

governments and officials. However, from a long-term and forward-looking perspective, allowing local communities to participate in the decision-making process is imperative.



*Namgyal, Conservationist, Director, Qinghai Lake Environmental Protection Station*

The forum urged that current policies be reconsidered on the basis of three key factors regarding husbandry on the grasslands: nomads, livestock, and the rangeland. The theory of “pasture balance” and the “tragedy of the commons” needs to be reexamined for its applicability in grassland husbandry. Assuming the inevitable effects of urbanization and marketization, the mechanisms of the market, official policies, and community customs must be viewed as interactive and interdependent. Only when there is consensus on these issues can sustainable economic development and resource management be achieved.



*Mark Elliott, Professor of Chinese and Inner Asian History, Harvard University, and Director, Harvard Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies*

### Official Recognition of Civil Society Organizations

Local governments in the Tibetan region, particularly at the prefectural and county levels, regard ecological conservation activities organized by local communities or civil society organizations as politically sensitive. Environmental conservation activities are therefore strictly controlled or even constrained authorities. In November 2011, the State Council authorized the establishment of Sanjiangyuan National Ecological Conservation Experimental Area, which clearly stated that the development of protection mechanisms with “farmers and nomads as the primary stakeholders” should be explored.



*Wang Hong, Vice Director, IEMG, Development Research Center, Chinese State Council*

Therefore, environmental conservation organizations and grassroots organizations founded by farmers and nomads should be given substantial support and approval as their participation in environmental governance activities is in line with state ecological strategic goals and planning. The fundamental cause of many current environmental and social problems in Tibet is the local government’s inadequate acknowledgement of “nomads as primary stakeholders” and the unwillingness to officially recognize local civil society organizations. The forum recommends, as a start, that there be a gradual opening of space for non-government organizations and environmental conservation NGOs.



*Kunchok Palzang, TSERING Project Manager, Winrock International (China)*

### **Investment in Education and Research Related to Ecological Construction and the Coordination of Governance in Tibet**

Due to the unique ecological and environmental characteristics of the Tibetan Plateau, the ecological principles and experience accumulated in low altitude regions cannot simply be applied to Tibet. It requires that scientists and nomads explore, test and verify through their continuous local practices. This is in accordance with the Scientific Outlook of Development and an application of Mass Line. Research that should be conducted include: pasture grazing capacity management based on the ecological balance in the grasslands; the discussion and deliberation mechanism for environmental issues in rural communities; and community leadership program in conservation. A twenty-year capacity-building program should also be established to develop at least 500 college students majoring in environmental conservation from colleges that excel in environmental conservation studies.



*Wang Shiyong (Kesang Gyamtso), Professor, Dean, Business School, Qinghai Normal University*

### **Establish an Experimental Policy Research and Practice Site on Ecological Conservation in the Sangjiangyuan (Chumar River) Area**

Chumar Village is located in the Sanjiangyuan (Source of Three Rivers) National Conservation Area, which is known as the “Water Tower of China.” The village is a very important water source area of the northern origin of Yangtze River. The Party and government of Chumar, in line with the general plan of the Sanjiangyuan Comprehensive Experimental Zone and the application of the policies of the national ecological development model zone, have determined to develop Chumar as an Ecological Civilization Model Area.



*Li Shengzhi, Associate Director, Rural Development Research Institute, Sichuan Social Science Academy*

To this end, the Township Party Committee and government of Chumar invited Snowland Great Rivers Environmental Protection Association to work in cooperation. Through the establishment and operation of Eco-Civilization Rural Social Service Workshop, a path to ecological civilization is being explored based on local practice. However, the conservation area of Chumar is as vast as twenty thousand square kilometers where nomadic residences are widely dispersed, transportation and telecommunications are poor and there is little opportunity to connect and work cooperatively with the outside world.

The TGAP Forum therefore proposes that the Institute for Ethnic Minority Groups (IEMG) of the State Council’s Development Research Center establish an Ecological Conservation Comprehensive Policy Research and Practice Site at Sanjiangyuan’s Chumar River area.

## TGAP TIMELINE

### Shanghai



Second TGAP Forum held on *Conservation, Resource Management and Local Governance in Tibet: Challenges and Prospects in Policy Perspective*, at the Harvard Center Shanghai on August 10-12, 2013

2013

### Québec



McGill University and Université du Québec à Montréal hosts first TGAP Forum on *Language Policy and Practice in Tibet*. Québec TGAP Policy Workshop leads to development of policy recommendations on Tibetan language use, regulation and reform

2012

### Beijing

Beijing meeting on *Inclusive Development and Tibet: Concept, Practice, Experience* leads to emergence of a consensus on a framework for dialogue on governance in Tibet

2011

### Dartsedo



IEMG participates in Machik Social Business Forum in Dartsedo, Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture

2010

### Oslo

Second Oslo meeting in Holmsbu, Norway, explores governance as framework for regional economic development issues

### Oslo



Chinese State Council's IEMG requests Oslo Coalition, through IGE, to host exploratory meeting of international Tibet scholars

2009

### University of Virginia



In partnership with Machik, UVa Symposium explores governance as framework for education and language policy discussions

2008