



Chinese and other models of development in Tibet: subsidies, infrastructure, urbanization and the search for sustainability

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This paper studies and analyses impacts of China's development efforts in the Tibetan Plateau region over the past five decades and identifies and recommends alternatives to present development model. China is so diverse in terms of geography, culture and ethnicity. The geography and culture of the Tibetan Plateau are exceptional, and yet the model for development in the Tibetan Plateau region since the late 50s has been based on the lowland Chinese experiences and features. This lowland China model for development in the Tibetan Plateau results in the present chronic dependency on support and subsidies from Beijing and other provinces; and dismal performance in the socio-economic outcomes exacerbating the rural-urban divide. This dependency is not sustainable and healthy in the long term.

The rural and urban divide is by no means a uniquely Chinese or Tibetan experience, it is as much a part of the modernization worldwide. However, the divide between the Tibetan rural sector and the urban Chinese sector is more glaring and a result of neglect of rural sector and the role of indigenous knowledge through the state's development policies and plans.

China is now at a very early stage of another massive program, West China Development Strategy, to develop its western region. It is wise to pay attention to an ancient Chinese proverb: "To know the road ahead, ask those coming back." Present development policies in the Tibetan Plateau region rely on state subsidies and support to fuel non-productive and unsustainable infrastructure development and urbanization projects in the Tibetan Plateau region.

Since the 1950s, in the pursuit of modernization and regional economic development, there has been a tendency on the part of the State planners to blame Tibet's backwardness on its geography and the "extremely poor quality of human resources". Yet Chinese immigrants into the Tibetan Plateau are viewed as asset rather than being viewed as an economic pressure on a fragile environment and its human carrying capacity. In

Poverty of Plenty – a comparative economic study of the two poorest regions of China, Guizhou and Tibet Autonomous Region in the late 80s, the two Chinese economists also note that the large Chinese population would invigorate the economies of backward regions... since they would “bring new learning and culture.” However, this has not happened if available Chinese statistics particularly on education and literacy are any indication.

The paper discusses the fact that the differences in the economic system, concepts of resources, land and social organization of the Tibetan Plateau would mean different paths for achieving the goals of economic development. It discusses the relevance of traditional Tibetan economic and environmental relations, and indigenous Tibetan agricultural and pastoral practices in Tibet’s development policies, and the need for incorporating the indigenous knowledge into present development model. The paper also mentions the growing evidence that population explosion has occurred on the Tibetan Plateau, which in turns puts pressure on the carrying capacity of the land to sustain the growing population.

The paper identifies the clear lack of rural development strategy as a major factor for the failure of development efforts in the region. Although the Tibetan Plateau is characterized by physical, economic and cultural uniqueness which are viewed as constraints, there are natural and comparative advantages offered by the very nature of the Plateau’s natural and social conditions. The Tibetan farmers and herders have maintained sustainable livelihoods on the fragile ecology over thousand years, and the first right step is to involve and listen to the very people that the state is attempting to develop. Just across the Himalayas, Nepal and Bhutan have much experience of with different development alternatives such as community-based development, social forestry, participatory rural development, eco-tourism and gender sensitive development. Their experience gives a wealth of information and guidance on approaching development work in land locked mountainous regions with fragile ecology.

The paper concludes with recommendations for an alternative development model based on appropriate and relevant infrastructure development so as to ensure real benefits to the local inhabitants and ensure sustainable development practices. Change in development thought and implementation is necessary. Empowerment of the local population is the key issue to reduce regional disparities. How should China empower the backward regions? Purely income subsidies are not recommended, except for those living in absolute poverty. In addition to appropriate and relevant infrastructure development, the focus should be on enhancing the long-term development capabilities of backward regions through investment in human capital and tapping potentials in rural development through appropriate policy and institutional support.