

# **Roadmap to a coordinated masterplan: Rural revitalization in Sichuan province in China**

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**Key words:** rural revitalization, rural-urban gap, Hanns Seidel Foundation

## **SUMMARY**

Recently China adopted the rural revitalization strategy in response to the rapid rural-urban migration and emergence of hollow villages, characterised by the declining and aging populations, limited economic and social opportunities for residents, and depleting natural resources. It intends to cover different aspects, including political, cultural, social, and ecological progress. The ultimate aim is to speed up the modernization in rural areas.

This study is based on a pilot project in Sichuan Province in P.R. China, undertaken by the Hanns Seidel Foundation, which is energising the Chinese rural revitalization strategies. This study draws the process of masterplan approach for rural revitalization and lessons from the pilot project in the context of landscape and ecological planning. The study findings confirm that this pilot project would provide experience and help in the implementation of China's new rural revitalization policy.

# Roadmap to a coordinated masterplan: Rural revitalization in Sichuan province in China

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Rural revitalization refers to the process of rural transformation towards sustainability and competitiveness of rural areas by solving principal economic, social and ecological problems, faced by the region in a specific period. It is a strategy, which is constructed upon a foundation of different dimensions of equality between urban and rural areas. With the example of rural America, Clugston (1997) referred rural revitalization as a synonym of economic growth, which sometimes connotes recognition of the riches of rural culture and the need to preserve it. It will depend largely on improving the farm economy, supplemented, when possible, by improvement in business, climate and efficiencies in a range of supportive industries (ibid). Though rural revitalization is considered as a panacea for overcoming the challenges that a rural area faces, the success of the rural revitalization tends to depend on the rural community revitalization, which is often neglected at policy level. Therefore, to achieve the rural revitalization at a broader level, understanding of how rural communities can revitalize themselves to diversify their economic base, to enhance their quality of life, and to reinvent themselves for new functions and roles, is essential.

In recent years, China's rapid economic growth and urban biased development have contributed to the rural-urban migration and emergence of hollow villages characterised by the declining and aging populations, limited economic and social opportunities for residents, and depleting natural resources. With an ultimate aim of speeding up the modernization in rural areas, rural revitalization strategy was adopted during the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China on 18 October 2017. It is a response to the rural challenges, which pursues balanced economic and agricultural development. The President Xi Jinping in his report said that, *“We must prioritize the development of agriculture and rural areas. To build rural areas with thriving business, pleasant living environment, social etiquette and civility, effective governance and prosperity, we need to put in place sound systems, mechanisms and policies for promoting integrated urban rural development, and speed up the modernization of agriculture and rural areas”*. The ‘Document Number One’ of 2018, which reflects the top priority of the central government, also draws a roadmap for China reaching three goals: by 2020 significant progress in rural rejuvenation, by 2035 agricultural modernization, and by 2050 a strong agriculture sector and full realization of farmers’ wealth. In response, the Ministry of Agriculture is looking at a more scientific approach supported with local data collected from villages across China.

The Hanns Seidel Foundation (HSS) has been represented in the People's Republic of China for more than 30 years. The organization undertook and implemented various projects within the development cooperation. This study is based on a pilot project in Nanchong in Sichuan Province in P.R. China, undertaken by the HSS during 2016/2019, which is energizing the

Chinese rural revitalization strategies. This study draws the lessons from the experience of the participatory approach to rural revitalization with a particular focus on process of ecological assessment and landscape planning adopted at field level.

## **2. NARROWING RURAL-URBAN GAP IN CHINA: ROLE OF RURAL REVITALIZATION**

Traditionally, the Chinese rural population has been largely immobile, but over recent decades, rural–urban migration has taken place at a considerable scale (Gao, Ivolga and Erokhin 2018). Different driving factors influence internal migration across China. However, rural-urban income gap is one of the prime factors considered by Chinese workers when they migrate from the countryside to cities. A recent study shows that China’s per capita income and consumption levels are increasing year by year, but urban residents’ income levels and consumption levels are significantly higher than rural residents, and the gap is widening year by year (Wang and Zhou 2018). As a result, many villages have emptied out or are mainly inhabited by those who have been “left behind” in China’s migration movement: the elderly, the children and the disabled (Meyer-Clement 2018). Other villages have been swallowed up by the expanding cities – a process that has destroyed valuable farmland and left millions of peasants landless (ibid).

The use by Chinese specialists of the term “Three Rural Issues” (sannong wenti) sums up the urgent need for China to modernize its agriculture, improve farmers’ socio-economic situation, and develop basic infrastructure in rural areas. It is clear that modernization in terms of the three rural issues cannot rely on industrialization and urbanization alone. Instead it must treat agriculture, rural areas and rural residents as the priority for development (Hong 2016). It is also very important for industries and urban areas to back-feed agriculture and rural areas. (ibid). Therefore, the key to solve the “three rural issues” is to maintain a steady development of agriculture, increase the income of peasants, and reduce the gap between the urban and rural areas and between regions (Wang and Zhou 2018).

The strategy of “Rural Revitalization” is a major strategy for solving the “three rural issues” and a necessary way for rural development in the new era in China (Wang and Zhou 2018). The meaning of rural revitalization is to “maintain the priority of rural development, establish a sound urban-rural integration and policy system, and accelerate the modernization of rural areas in accordance with the general requirements of industrial prosperity, ecological livability, rural civilization, effective governance, and affluent life” (ibid). It can help balance major economies by generating demand within the country and reducing reliance on exports to other countries (Fan 2018). Rural revitalization strategy in China will consider key issues like employment and livelihoods, environmental sustainability, territorial development connecting rural areas with intermediate cities/towns and large urban areas, infrastructure and connectivity, and rural services (ibid). In this respect Zhang Xiaoshan, the Director of the Rural Development Institute, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences said, “*When we talk about farmers, villages and agriculture, the mindset should go beyond the relationship between the three. We should view it from a broader perspective. We should consider the distribution of national income, public*

*administration and governance mechanisms*” (CGTN 2018). However, the realization of the “Village Revitalization” program is not to copy the intact rural areas into a modern city, but to learn from each other’s strengths, to introduce modern ideas and technologies to the rural on the basis of maintaining rural cultural characteristics, creating a socialist modern new countryside (Wang and Zhou 2018).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative and draws the lessons from the experience of the participatory approach to rural revitalization with a particular focus on ecological assessment and landscape planning. This study is based on a pilot project undertaken in Baoping, Ylong county and Jinyuan, Xichong county in Nanchong in Sichuan Province in P.R. China, undertaken during 2016/2019 by the HSS, being facilitated by the Sichuan Department of the Ministry of Natural Resources.

Nanchong is experiencing the problems of hollow villages due to the rapid growth of rural-urban migration. The region lost 86 percent of its rural population. Agriculture’s contribution to GDP is only 15 percent and 30 percent of the total area is abandoned cropland.

Map: Location of pilot projects areas



Jinyuan, Xichong County, Nanchong



Baoping, Ylong County, Nanchong

The key principle of the pilot project was to empower the communities of the region to be able to examine their own priorities for improving their sustainability, in response to the challenges from urban biased development. The pilot project aimed at adopting two innovative approaches to ecological assessment and landscape planning – first, providing input and training to the rural people in order to ensure their participation in decision making process and second, advanced recording of results in apps, i.e. database and GIS.

### **3.1 Hanns Seidel Foundation at a glance**

The Hanns-Seidel-Foundation (HSS) is one of the seven non-profit political organizations in the Federal Republic of Germany. It runs around 100 projects in more than 60 countries worldwide, which has unique implementation process with direct funding from the German Government. The focus of these projects is on strengthening civil society, civic involvement and promoting the rule of law, education and management training, raising environmental awareness, advising decision-makers in politics, and business and administration. Core concern of the international cooperation is fighting poverty and to enhance sustainable development.

The HSS has been represented in People's Republic of China for more than 30 years. The organization undertook and implemented projects within the development cooperation. From the beginning, the projects in China are funded by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development. Therefore, the HSS is a part of the Official Development Assistance of the Federal Republic of Germany. Based on the guiding principles of the HSS, the foundation addressed issues in the field of politics and society, education, vocational training, and development of rural areas. A joint declaration on the Establishment of Friendly Relations between Shandong Province and the State of Bavaria was signed on 9 July 1987. The HSS, in collaboration with the Bavarian State Ministry for Food, Agriculture and Forestry, established a pilot project in 1989 for land consolidation and village renewal, which can be regarded as first modern approach in China that still shows an improvement of living condition and increased income. The success was clear and it became evident that there must be more research and training to implement and adapt the measures.

Through the development of concepts and model projects for the development of rural areas, the HSS is showing ways to improve the living and working conditions of the rural people aiming at balancing rural and urban areas, while taking into account the ecology and broad citizen participation.

## **4. STUDY FINDINGS**

The process of achieving a coordinated master plan followed the following consecutive steps:

### **I. Conventions and strategic targets**

#### **i. Agreement of administrative responsibility**

First step was to regulate administrative responsibilities and compulsoriness. This was carried out by the Ministry of Natural Resources of the Province of Sichuan, the city of Nanchong and the counties of Xichong and Ylong. A basic agreement among the project partners was signed. The Chinese-German Education and Research Center for Land Reclamation and Land Development, Representative Qingzhou, China (BFL) of the Hanns Seidel Foundation were involved as cooperation partners.

## **ii. Formulation of strategic targets**

On the basis of the agreement the following main strategic targets were formulated:

- To explore the application of new land policies;
- To integrate different policies, build a comprehensive platform, and attract social funds;
- To mobilize the farmers in the project area;
- To prioritize technical, coordinated and sustainable quality;
- To adopt a flexible way of thinking;
- To think in multiple time stages and several development scenarios;
- To compliance with the principles of economy;
- To test advanced methods, content and technology;
- To encourage citizen participation, ecological landscape planning, vitality check, and use of GIS-based planning;
- To pay attention to the needs of the people, especially the elderly and the left behind children.

## **II. Information and capacity building**

Capacity building is a basic requirement to prepare local actors to lead a strategic, comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach of planning. In the Nanchong project capacity building took place on academic and local administrative level which included two summer schools in Beijing and Chendu for young Chinese professionals and training weeks in Nanchong for representatives of various authorities from provincial, city, county, municipal and village level respectively.

Among a variety of topics, particular focus was given on

- Landscape planning and ecological assessment
- Methods of civil participation
- Interdisciplinary approach

Furthermore, a very important component in capacity building was field excursions at local level, and discussions with experts as well as with concerned local citizens. These excursions fostered communication with locals and thus became a form of civil participation as well.

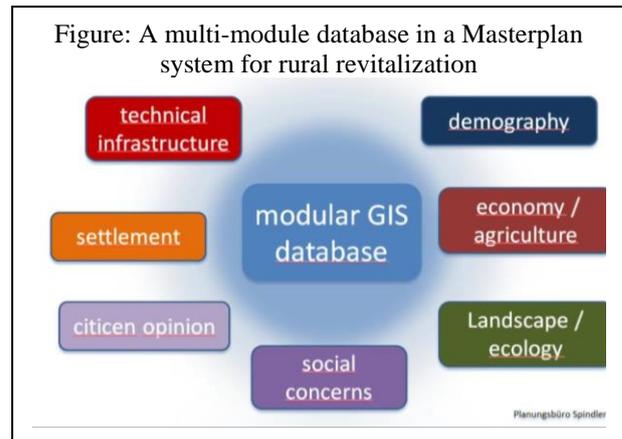
Delegated representatives of the project areas also visited and studied the former cooperation projects of the Hanns Seidel Foundation in different provinces, such as projects in Sanbaishan, Jiangxi, in Zitong, Chongqing and in Nan Zhang Lou, Shandong province.

## **III. Inventory and evaluation**

Inventory and evaluation is a classical step in all kind of development planning. The innovative approach in the projects should build an interactive GIS supported database, in which several fields of action are represented in modules.

In the pilot project the advanced inventory of the area in a database included:

- Analysis of demographical factors
- Survey of agricultural structures
- Survey of technical infrastructure
- Survey of social concerns
- Survey of several aspects of settlement
- Landscape inventory and ecological analysis:
  - Survey of landscape ecology (mapping in a GIS database)
  - Definition, mapping and evaluating typical landscape structures
  - Analyzing ecological functions, valuation in a point score
- Citizen participation: interviewing the local people and evaluating results in an GIS database



#### IV. Networked fields of action

Rural revitalization cannot be successful, if it is based on a single target, for example on agriculture only. Revitalizing countryside requires an interdisciplinary approach, covering several networked fields of action. Therefore, in the pilot project the field of actions included agriculture and stockbreeding, road infrastructure and traffic, settlement and village renewal, social matters, education, culture and health, non-agricultural economy (jobs), landscape and ecology, and country tourism.

#### V. Determine the core problems

Based on the key questions fixed followed by formulation of strategic targets, core problems were identified, which described the main causes of circumstances that hinder rural development and reduce people's quality of life. Identified core problems were the "concentrated essence of weaknesses", which were determined by citizen survey, evaluation of documents, which were analyzed in every individual fields of action.

#### VI. Formulate targets for the master plan

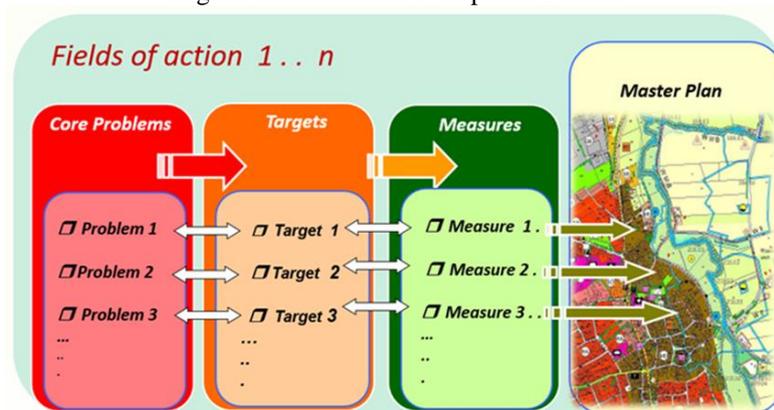
The master plan was a multi-issue development plan, which covered the entire area of a whole municipality (including crossover relationships) and considered all relevant fields of development in several time period and priority sections. In the pilot project the entirety of the comprehensive goals were resulted in the mission statement (German: "Leitbild"). It represented a binding guideline for the sustainable development of a space with networking of economic, social, cultural and ecological components. Its main objective was to improve the living and working, and ecological conditions of rural people and to create a long-term condition for migrated humans to return to rural areas and revitalize them. Methodologically, the targets were to show up ways that were able to address and solve the determined core problems.

## VII. Formulate measures to implement targets

Measures are mandatory to be based on formulated targets, otherwise they may hold the risk of failure. Some of the characteristics of successful measures were:

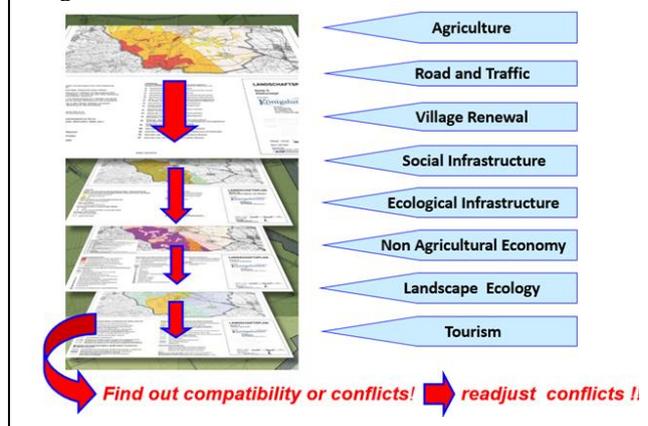
- Sustainable - not wasting ecology, resources, money
- Quality and durability
- Maintenance after investment
- Finding acceptance among people
- Appropriate and unobtrusive
- Balance of expense and benefits
- Adapted to the local problem areas, not planned schematically
- Adequate developmental stages instead of maximum size

Figure: Master Plan Development Process



## VIII. Coordinate and implement the master plan

Figure: Putting Layers of the Sectoral Planning Together



Coordination of a complex and comprehensive planning followed three parallel steps: technical coordination, public interests coordination and civil participation coordination.

Last step of coordination was to check if targets and measures were free of conflict, otherwise the targets and measures would be readjusted properly. If conflicts cannot be solved on lower level, higher level government administration should decide, after consideration of public interests and arguments.

Finalizing the master plan ideally means that a comprehensive, sustainable development plan can be completed and coordinated with all involved public actors. The master plan draft can pass through a scrutiny procedure by the relevant government agencies and can thus be made binding. An important part of the audit will be to provide the necessary financial resources for the partners for implementation. A score of measure is to be setup to implement measures according to priority and time sequence - high, medium, low priority, and short, medium and long term measures.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The HSS pilot project explored new modes of landscape planning for rural revitalization and mobilized the rural people to develop themselves and their communities. On the whole, it provided experience and guidelines for the implementation of future projects related to China's new rural revitalization policy.

Core challenges determined from field study not only helped to formulate targets for landscape planning, but also to develop strategic planning in the field of agriculture, settlement and village renewal, road infrastructure, non-agricultural activities, social services and tourism. Furthermore, parallel to the ecological landscape survey, a survey of civil society in the project areas took place and the results were included in a GIS-supported database and appraisal of the planning process.

Based on the lessons learned from the pilot project, the study suggests the following:

- Investing in social, technical and ecological infrastructure;
- Strengthening self-responsibilities of communities and villagers;
- Creating innovative job opportunities in rural areas;
- Considering environmental sustainability in long-term strategic planning and policies;
- Promoting education and social infrastructure as key qualities of life; and
- Encouraging capacity development and citizen participation in the planning process.

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