



EUROPEAN POLICYBRIEF



URBACHINA

**POLICY BRIEF: “URBAN COMMUNITIES
AND SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY”**

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This is a report from Work Programme 5 on ‘Urban communities and social sustainability’ of the Urbachina project on sustainable urbanisation in China. It summarises evidence of particular achievements and problems found and feasible policy solutions to the problems found.

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INTRODUCTION

For this work programme the team of six researchers enquired into policy implementation and policy formation at the grassroots of city governance. In particular we studied on the one hand the lowest levels of state administration and planning and on the other hand residents' involvement in policy implementation and formation and their own associations and uses of public spaces.

City governance in China has aimed both to promote economic development and in particular to generate its own local-level revenue from property development and commercial fees, and also to promote 'self-management, self-education, and self-service' by local residents through residents' committees, elections of residents' representatives and provision of centres and public spaces for volunteer organisers of cultural and educational activities. At the same time and at the same level as residents' committees, work stations provide basic social services under the Ministry of Civil Affairs to local residents in need, and a vital non-state agency, Property Management Companies, often supplements residents' committees in providing maintenance of public spaces, housing fabric, and security.

An endemic problem for planning and policy implementation has been defined as fragmented authoritarianism and the accompanying bureaucratic politics of bargaining between systems and levels by Kenneth Lieberthal and David Lampton (eds) (1992) *Bureaucracy, Politics and Decision-making in post-Mao China*, University of California Press. In our case there is a lack of coordination of different ministries' policy priorities, in particular between ministries of Civil Affairs, of Land and Resources, of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, and of the CCP's (Chinese Communist Party's) own priority of promoting social management and residents' self-management. The key instances for balancing and coordinating policy priorities are the Planning departments of cities down to the city district and the CCP branch committees including the Party committee at the level of the residents' committee.

The aims of policy and the rewards for its implementation in the Chinese system give priority to stability above all, but often policies contradict each other in their implementation. A key instance in our work programme is the contradiction between the implementation of plans through property development, which involves dislocation and rehousing of residents, and the formation of communities of self-management, including communal activities and mediation of disputes. Dislocation destroys the built-up sense of community among residents, in old urban areas or in newly urbanizing villages. Commercial property development increases housing types by price and lifestyle, creating segregation and it even divides residents within residents' committee areas. Another great problem of planning and policy is coping with the huge numbers of migrant workers who are mainly temporary, though some become permanent residents. Chronic lack of housing affordable by those with low incomes, especially the migrant workers, results in overcrowded old housing or in severely cramped accommodation in newly built housing let to migrant workers as well as urban village housing and old work unit and other less desirable housing being rented out while the young and upwardly mobile move to other areas of more desirable types of housing.

Our research included interviews with the staff of residents' committees and of property management companies in which they expressed the difficulties of their jobs, including greater workloads than they could manage with their staffing, pay and fees. On their part, residents told us of the severe limits to their participation in nominations for candidates for their representation, their lack of interest in elections, indifference to the organized activities of their 'community', and how the newly professionalized staff of residents' committees was (and kept) out of touch with residents. Locally registered residents also expressed their suspicions of migrant worker neighbours. Among the difficulties of forming property owners' associations, which could involve a much larger proportion of residents than are presently involved in residents' committees, are bringing together increasingly differentiated, if not segregated, locally registered residents – migrant workers are excluded anyway.

The same interviews with officials and residents suggested remedies to some of these problems.

Governance: planning and policy

1. Policy is made in cycles of big initiatives without much foresight or testing and with improvisation, lack of diagnosis and contextualisation, relying on lower levels to improvise its implementation. Lower level officials are blamed from above by their seniors and below by the subjects and victims of policy implementation. Planners are constrained by policy initiatives and they and the Party spend much effort mediating and coordinating ministerial and other, including private, corporate stakeholders.

Positively put, policy implementation leaves room for creative improvisation. The Party continues to be vital in its coordination function at all levels.

Officials at the lowest levels of a number of state agencies, including land requisition, as well as staff in residents' committees complained of the time it took for policies to be changed to take into account the details of implementation encountered by them. The arbitrary imposition of plans and policies of development and relocation endanger implementation of recent laws on compensation and on consultation with residents.

Planning and policy-making are hampered by inaccurate population data. We were told that the number of migrant residents was a constant surprise and problem.

Governance: the Residents' Committees, Property Management Companies, and Property Owners' Associations

2. Participation in Residents' committee (RC) activities is limited to volunteers who are usually from among the retired and especially retired Party members. RCs both as representative staff and as social work and service station staff are fully occupied with providing services for the elderly, the disabled, for instance with annual health checks, with laid off workers – helping some to start small businesses - and with the needy requiring social income and others requiring psychological counselling. They rarely have time to mediate disputes, which is listed as one of their main tasks. The local Party committee and sometimes the Youth League supplement this work by organizing volunteers to visit the elderly or help children of working parents to come to after-school homework and other activities, and arranging didactic speeches, for instance about care for the environment.

Working age residents, the great majority, have little or nothing to do with these 'community' activities or with their RC, they reported to us. They occupy themselves with family and friends in their own networks. Elections to RCs are anyway unrepresentative in the great majority of cases. Working age residents are usually indifferent, not involved. Nearly all of migrant workers have less than the stipulated number of years of continuous residence in the area to vote.

RC staff reported to us that they are over worked, underpaid and unable to approximate the ideals of serving the people of their jurisdiction and so they lose heart and motivation, leading to problems of governance even in meeting show targets of policy implementation. Residents' own self-organised activities (singing, dancing, musical bands, gambling) continue to flourish but are constrained in the horizontal scope of linkage unless endorsed by the Party at higher levels of government.

Property Management Companies (PMCs), usually appointed by the development company that built the housing areas, are in many RC areas in charge of the maintenance of public spaces, including stairwells and elevators, the fabric of buildings, public spaces, and security. Sometimes RCs perform these functions, and in one case a Housing management committee (like RCs funded by the Street office). Because PMCs and rental offices rely for their income on residents' fees or rents, regularly collected, they are far better

informed about residents in the area of the RC's jurisdiction than is the RC itself. In one field site the PMC reported regular population changes directly to the Street office, normally the task of the RC.

In all but the most expensive housing estates we found dissatisfaction among residents with the performance of RCs and PMCs. Sometimes this was, according to PMC and RC staff, because, especially among newly urbanized villagers, residents were not able to distinguish the responsibilities of different government departments, holding PMC and RC responsible for everything that went wrong, such as faulty electricity supply and meters. But there was widespread dissatisfaction with maintenance and security services as well. We ourselves observed everywhere except in the most expensive estates, lack of maintenance of gardens, paths and playgrounds.

RC staff told us they were too occupied with performing tasks assigned to them by Street-level government to engage in income-raising projects that could pay for new activities, involving more residents, let alone maintenance. PMC staff told us that residents were not willing, and the poorer were indeed not able, to pay increased fees necessary to improve maintenance and security.

In nearly all but the higher-end housing areas, property owners' associations (POAs) have not been formed despite attempts in some to do so. Either the procedures and preconditions are prohibitive, or uniting residents in different housing types is too difficult, or PMCs have interfered in the process and created conflict preventing the formation of a POA. Yet POAs are the most obvious and officially sanctioned way of dealing with issues of maintenance and security and they are a means of creating 'community' self-governance.

Planning and policy implementation: urban development and relocation

3. Expansion, renewal and refurbishment of urban housing stock has improved the quality of housing for most urban residents, established and new, in terms of space, internal kitchen and bathroom, utilities and waste removal. But relocation of low-mid-income residents too often means breaking up of neighbourliness and imposes long travel distances to work, which has forced some to move back into crowded central accommodation.

Development of high-end housing and commerce and conservation of heritage or old-style rebuilding entail relocating most current residents to good but distant housing, leaving the old and children there, in the distant housing while the middle-aged and young seek residence and work according to their own networks elsewhere in the city. Partial refurbishment of old work unit housing continues, the middle-aged and young again moving away to more desirable housing.

Planning of public spaces

4. Green, landscaped spaces and squares, small and large, are well used by residents. This is one of the great achievements of Chinese urban planning and landscaping. But large spaces are sometimes designed to be didactic, forbidding some residents' choice of activities.

Market and food stalls are legal only in designated covered markets.

Refuges for the mobile population of workers and the self-employed continue to be subject to forcible removal.

Planning and development: tourism

5. Selection of big temples, markets, and famous sites continues to exclude and destroy urbanized villagers' and local urban residents' own sense of heritage, their own institutions of historical commemoration and occasions for ritual and festival. Ex-villagers and relocated locals are turned into hotel and catering menials.

Planning and policy implementation: urbanizing villages

6. Forcible integration by land requisitioning and commercial consolidation of arable land by agro-industrial companies leaves the elderly and children living on compensation and possibly on rent while the middle-aged and young seek urban employment and residence elsewhere in the city. At present those left behind after leaseholds have been sold to agro-companies live in a vulnerable legal limbo of 'small housing'.

Similarly, villagers who have built their own urban housing are subject to plans that require destruction of these new buildings as they are incorporated into the city.

Relocated villagers are kept together, but in high-rise blocks, in which it is far less easy to socialise-

Social policy and planning implementation: social and affordable housing

7. Because the prices of Economic and Comfortable Housing (ECH) have risen and because of a chronic shortage of affordable new housing, rented and crowded poor-quality old work-unit and 'urban villages' (villages that have been absorbed into the city and that provide cheap overcrowded and unsanitary accommodation for migrant workers) remain.

Socially integrated purpose-built public rented housing projects, being pioneered in Chongqing, could be in danger of becoming what in the UK are called 'sink' (disreputable, high unemployment, welfare-dependent) estates because better-educated residents move out, as those we interviewed intended, and equivalents are no longer attracted to these estates because of poor maintenance. In the absence of industrial parks or service economy jobs the middle-aged and young move out anyway.

Social policy and planning: provision of nurseries, schools, clinics and nearby hospitals

8. Poorer quality clinics, greater distances to hospitals, and larger class sizes in the schools in many affordable housing areas drive the better-off from these into better-provided areas, leaving the remainder in a declining housing area. Developers continue to ignore the planned stipulations for the provision of these facilities unless and until they add a phase of more expensive, commercial housing.

Social policy and planning: integrating migrant workers and ex-farmers – hukou reform

9. Registration of migrant workers remains a major task of Residents Committees (RCs) but it is underfunded. Migrant workers' mobility continues to cause problems to planners and policy implementers by their unexpectedly large numbers. Migrant workers continue to be given different access to schooling and medical facilities than those with local, urban registration (hukou) because of municipal budgetary constraints.

Training for incorporated villagers continues to be rudimentary, enabling them only to find the most menial employment.

Social policy and planning: social polarization and exclusion

10. Segregation of housing types according to different wealth and income-based life styles continues. Those living in welfare/affordable housing and migrants in provisional housing are excluded and blamed for their lesser quality and culture in cases of crime and pollution or problems of hygiene.

Planning

1. Senior levels of government could be given recognition and reward for responding more quickly to lower-level feedback on plans and policies, allowing policies to be flexible and to be adjusted quickly. Career promotion criteria should include this as a key. 'People' centred policy could be redefined to prioritise learning from residents and their own associations.

Planners' professional expertise and their own learning from previous plan implementation could be recognized and respected by ministries and by leaders of municipalities.

Residents' Committees, Property Management Companies, and Property Owners' Associations

2. Indifference to RC elections may well continue benignly until an issue crops up. When mobilized by such an issue or issues of policy and governance, concerned residents should be encouraged to put up their own lists of candidates and to campaign among fellow residents. RC staff could in addition hold open meetings with the public on specific issues. A website and newsletter, which some RCs already run, should be more open to contributions by residents.

Otherwise, Property owners' associations and their elected committees can become the main form of local level public participation. RC staff should be rewarded for encouraging their formation, guiding residents through the procedures and preventing property management companies from manipulating them.

Lateral organization and linkage between residents' associations for various purposes should be more widely tolerated, including property owners associations. Associations of residents' organisations could with benefit to self-governance be allowed to link up across a city and between cities not just for recreation but for study and discussion.

RCs should be better staffed and paid, tasked with reporting changes in population and other problems of plan implementation, but leaving time for visits to residents and encouraging their self-organisation for cultural, recreational and educational activities. Volunteers, building representatives and residents' associations should report annually to the RCs who report up to not only the next higher level of government (sub-district, i.e. Street or Shequ) but directly to the District (Qu) planning office.

RC staff should be rewarded for making sure they visit and acquaint themselves with residents, not just stay in their office. They should be paid and rewarded for explaining and encouraging residents' self-government, using their own initiatives for activities and use of the RC activity room.

Viable relocation

3. Relocation into affordable housing in the same area as residents are already located is current policy but should be made a realistic choice for them, including refurbished heritage housing. On the other hand, for new housing developments public transport should from the start be extended, fast and cheap, to enable access to employment locations. A range of housing types and costs should be built alongside industrial districts with a matching range of employment and wages, providing for the integrated use of public spaces and schools and clinics by different income groups.

Public spaces (including streets and lanes)

4. Planners should take into account residents' chosen uses of public space even though unanticipated. Incorporated villagers should be consulted by planners through village committees but also through openly

invited petitions about retention of their public buildings, the convenience of market stalls, and their own housing that enables neighbourly socialisation.

Management of public space should be in response to complaints about noise and pollution (waste management) and constriction of movement of pedestrians and traffic in the case of street-side stall and small-food providers. Otherwise street stalls are a convenience, cherished by residents, as are the small businesses of migrant workers, catering to both fellow migrants and to locally registered residents. These too should be much more easily tolerated and licensed. That is a good way of encouraging the settlement and integration of migrant workers.

Planners develop what culture and tourist bureaux select but they should also endorse and benignly tolerate locals' own renewals of tradition and cultural initiatives. Locals and ex-villagers should be given the opportunity to raise funds to keep significant buildings or places and to develop their own cultural enterprises.

Urbanisation of villages

5. Distant villagers urbanise on their own terms, building modern low-rise residences, gardening and raising domestic animals on their own plots. In addition, through agricultural extension they should be enabled to form their own cooperative/collective agricultural industry and consolidation and be encouraged to form cooperatives for the sale of their products. Otherwise villagers could become share-holders in cash-cropping consolidated agriculture.

Law on rural property should be reformed to legalise 'small housing'.

In the case of near, peri-urban villages being incorporated into the built-up city area, planners should tolerate a mix of urban types, including both high rises and villagers' lower-rise, already-built dwellings.

Affordable housing, health and schooling

7. ECH housing and Public-rented purpose built housing should be increased so long as there are work-places nearby with jobs available for a wide range of skills. Strong enforcement of price and rent controls should include fining developers who breach them and who reduce the stipulated proportion of affordable housing in their development areas.

Funding for equitable provision of medical and schooling facilities should be included in plans and developers who ignore them should be heavily fined.

Registration of households should no longer exclude migrant workers from urban-registered access to medical facilities and insurance. Incorporated villagers should receive sufficient training for the full range of available jobs, ensuring participation in employer/employee social security schemes.

The task of this work package on ‘urban development, traditions and modern lifestyles’ has been to investigate how new municipal institutions interact with residents who bring to their urban relocation ways of organising themselves and improvise new ones. Our focal topics are therefore urban government and planning, self-government, and social sustainability.

We have a dual perspective on the key concept of ‘social sustainability’: inquiring on one hand into the views of government and planning and on the other hand the views of residents. We have elicited from lowest-level municipal government officials and planners their views of their work tasks and of the residents under their governance. Equally we have elicited from residents their views of each other and of their governance, including the prescribed organization of their self-government. Into this dual perspective comes the sustainability or not of urban social life, where sustainability includes the governmental and non-governmental handling of acute differences and conflicts of urban lifestyles, among different income groups or neighbours from different places with different claims to belong as well as conflicts between residents and property management companies and government.

Field research

Between March 2012 and April 2014, six researchers conducted field research in a total of 20 field sites, 6 in Shanghai, 6 in Chongqing, and 4 each in Huangshan and Kunming. 4 researchers conducted research in two cities, and 2 in one only. In each city each researcher worked in 2 field sites. The sites were the areas of the jurisdiction of the organ of ‘self-government’ – a Residents’ Committee. Each was selected for its broad range of housing types and life-styles, but making sure it included residents with low and middle-range incomes. One site of the 2 in each city was from a central district, the other from a newly formed peripheral district. We also made sure to include sites of special interest, such as the new public rental housing projects in Chongqing and old alleyway housing areas in Shanghai. Researchers spent 2 months in each of their field sites.

They had two basic schedules of topics for open-ended interviews. One was for state officials in the district and sometimes higher planning offices, the lowest administrative office (sub-district or Street), the Residents’ Committee work-station and volunteer representative staff and the Property Management Committee where one existed, plus officials in some other state agencies, such as the Land requisition office. The other was for a judgmental sample of 20 residents, selected to represent the full range of income and lifestyles, not for statistical analysis:-

Qu (urban district) planning office

- Implementation
- Feedback from residents
- Main difficulties
- Prospects

urban sub-district

- Responsibilities
- Implementation of plans
- Main difficulties
- Prospects

community – a sub-sub-district usually run by a residents’ committee

- *Juminweiyuanhui* (residents’ committee) – how organised, elections, etc
- Volunteers – ditto
- Relations with residents’ own organisations – i.e. home-owners or looser associations
- Main difficulties
- Prospects

Wuyeguanli (property management office)

- How funded
- Problems
- Main difficulties
- Prospects

Resident samples

- A general information about household
- B choice to live here
- C relation to residents’ committee and home-owners’ association
- D relation to property management company
- E informal associations and meeting points with other residents
- F complaints about other residents – how handled
- G waste management – complaints – how handled
- H utilities – ditto
- J sources of daily necessities - ditto
- K open areas – problems, how handled
- L security – ditto

In addition researchers reported their direct observations of the uses of public spaces, the quality and state of maintenance of these and of the different housing types. They collected local maps, plans and population statistics, and made their own photographic records. In sum, they used an extensive range of qualitative research methods, systematically designed for comparisons of the sites and their cities.

From the results they wrote full reports citing interviews, which they sent to the coordinator of the Work Programme. In addition, they will present their findings from each field site to a seminar over two days, 25 and 26 September 2014, at the London School of Economics, for discussion and comparison not only with each other but with our two scientific advisers who have long research experience in urban life and planning in China, Dan Abramson and David Bray, and by a number of others who have conducted research on urban life and governance in China and other parts of the world including Europe.

PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME	UrbaChina, Sustainable Urbanisation in China: Historical and Comparative Perspectives, Mega-trends towards 2050
COORDINATOR	Prof.Gipouloux, CNRS, Paris, France, gipouloux@ehess.fr
CONSORTIUM	Anhui Academy of Environmental Science Research – AAESR – Hefei, China Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique – CNRS – Paris, France East China Normal University – ECNU – Shanghai, China Enterprise Research Institute of Development Research Center of the State Council – DRC – Beijing, China Institute of Finance and Trade Economics, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences – CASS – Beijing, China Institute of Geographical Sciences and Natural Resources Research, Chinese Academy of Sciences – CAS – Beijing, China Instituto de Ciencias Sociais da Universidade de Lisboa – ICS – Lisbon, Portugal Istituto di Studi per l’Intergrazione dei Sistemi – ISIS – Rome, Italy London School of Economic and Political Science – LSE – London, United Kingdom Renmin University of China – RENDA – Beijing,China Service Enterprise Research Unit, the University of Birmingham – Uob-SERU – Birmingham, United Kingdom
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FOR MORE INFORMATION

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FURTHER READING

Forthcoming publications

Feuchtwang, Stephan (2015), "Urban Neighbourhoods" in Kevin Latham (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Chinese Culture and Society*, Abingdon, UK and New York, NY: Routledge

Zhang Hui, "Suburban resettlement: Housing farmers in Chongqing and Kunming" *Geography Research Forum* (forthcoming)

Zhang Hui, Paula Morais and Stephan Feuchtwang "Failures of policy and plan in the formation of urban community" in Francois Gipouloux (ed) *China's Urban Century: Governance, environment, and socio-economic Imperatives*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing,

