

RURAL LAND CONSOLIDATION IN CHINA

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Executive Summary

1. China's urbanization rate has increased drastically in the past decades. Consequently, as cultivated land becomes scarcer, the tension between rural land protection and urbanization has also intensified.
2. Per capita cultivated land in China is far below world average. Worse, land fragmentation and pollution further deteriorate land quality for farming. To ensure food security and improve living conditions for rural dwellers, the government has introduced the Rural Land Consolidation (RLC) program since 1998.
3. The Village Relocation and Combination (VRC) program is one of the four types of RLC programs. The program first identifies the central, the relocated, and the preserved villages. It then restructures the land-use layout by grouping the relocated villages with each central village, while leaving the preserved villages untouched.
4. The VRC programs in China have led to several problems. First is the discontent from rural collectives and villagers who were said to be coerced into participating in RLC programs. The promised access to infrastructure and other modern facilities come at a high financial, emotional and sociocultural costs to the villagers, thus generating strong resistance from them.
5. Second is the poor implementation of the program. Development control over rural land has long been weak and hence haphazard development is rampant. Besides, power asymmetry among program participants and biased benefit-sharing schemes favoring urban governments have caused dissatisfaction among villagers.
6. The successful pilot partnership-based and participative RLC program in Zhejiang and Sichuan provinces could be a solution. The program involves extensive participation of stakeholders, especially the rural communities and the villagers they represent. The government would be required to provide platforms and facilitate negotiations using RLC programs initiated by the villagers.

7. However, changes to existing RLC programs will not be easy. More extensive awareness of villagers' own rights and benefits, better negotiation skills of rural collectives, and greater transparency in villages' governance are prerequisites for a successful partnership-based consolidation program in the long term.
8. Despite the difficulties, partnership-based participative RLC programs will generate important long-term benefits. Successful experiments applying similar models in Zhejiang and Sichuan provinces have demonstrated that such programs can work.