

## DEVELOPING ALTERNATIVES TO RESETTLEMENT FOR PASTORALISTS ON THE TIBETAN PLATEAU

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### Abstract

This field report from the People's Republic of China describes the rapid changes in the large-scale settlement of pastoralists brought on by government policies. It discusses China's Grassland Law and the more recent 'converting pastures to grasslands' (in Mandarin, *tuimu huancao*) initiative. The complications and paradoxes of present land use policies are discussed drawing on empirical evidence gathered during fieldwork. This report describes efforts by two NGOs working in Tibetan pastoral communities to build social capital and cooperative entities for the purpose of improving economic welfare, particularly in response to the challenges faced as a result of government policies.

**Keywords:** China, development, Grassland Law, pastoralists, privatisation, resettlement

The rangelands of the Tibetan plateau are by far the most expansive areas of alpine grassland in the world. Covering an area of 1.65 million km<sup>2</sup>, the plateau contains diverse alpine types, from desert steppe in the west to moist alpine meadow in the east. These rangelands support the livelihoods of over five million people, many whom have traditionally led a nomadic life, according to the seasons and forage availability. The high elevation and cold temperatures have prevented much of the large-scale land use conversion from rangeland to cropland which has occurred in other pastoral regions of China, yet this has not stopped the onslaught of change, which has greatly influenced the lives of these people.

Pastoralists of the region are facing rapid change brought on by sweeping policies that have resulted in large-scale resettlement of nomadic people. Two general policies in particular have had dramatic impact on herders' livelihoods: the Grassland Law of the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC), initially passed in 1985 and revised in 2003, and ecological migration policies which are intended to protect the upper reaches of the Yangtze and Yellow Rivers. Both policies promote resettlement in varying forms – either by individually settling nomads on their own land, or altogether removing them from the rangelands through rural-to-urban migration.

The Grassland Law essentially 'privatises' the rangelands, dividing up the land into individual household parcels. Its implementation on the plateau began as early as the mid-1990s. In some areas, a strict interpretation of policy has been made and households have been forced onto individual plots of land, taking mandatory

loans to support house and barn construction and for rangeland improvements such as fencing and seeding. For most households, the loans far exceed their income and now interest on the debt is much greater than the original principal of the loan. In other areas, herders still manage rangelands communally, although officially the land has been divided to the household level. Such communal management arrangements are allowable under law. In reality, most of the rangelands of the plateau are still used and managed by such household or small village groups, despite government claims to the contrary.

Ecological migration policies are more recent, formulated in response to the perception that overgrazing in the upper reaches of the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers is contributing to the serious flooding evident in lower basin reaches. Implemented in a typical 'top-down' manner, the government identifies land that will be 'protected' through fencing. Two types of land are set aside: (1) winter grazing areas, to be protected for three to six months of the year; and (2) highly degraded areas to be off-limits to grazing for five years. Households that have been allocated land in these selected areas receive compensation in the form of grain subsidies.

Over 67 million ha of Tibetan grassland is slated for 'protection' for the period 2004–2009. In addition, in these areas households are identified for resettlement and moved to housing that is constructed either at the township, county or prefecture level. These households are required to sell all their livestock and receive a base sum for a period of five to ten years. In most cases, the new houses are highly subsidised, yet still require a substantial purchase amount which often far exceeds the capacity of poor nomadic households. To date, no solidified plans exist for vocational training for these people and as a result they are subjected to a life of menial labour or unemployment in urban areas.

In general, implementation of the land division and resettlement policies on the ground is fraught with complications. For one, little consideration has been given to the logistics of land division, often resulting in unfair allocation of parcels. Areas slated for protection fencing are often inaccessible and therefore other more accessible lands that can be reached by truck get fenced, taking valuable grazing land out of production. All of this is made worse by a bureaucracy that does not monitor local implementation, allowing corruption to take its toll. Most families agree that the land division has not been effective and would like to go back to a more traditional system of group grazing with access to larger territories. However, when asked about how they can do this, they feel that there is nothing they can do to change the policy and instead want fencing for their own land. In addition, they see the resettlement programmes as a threat to their long-term livelihood, although many poor households are willing or resigned to move.

The author is helping a number of international NGOs to develop alternatives to the ranching and urban settlement patterns found on today's Tibetan landscape. The focus is on building social capital within pastoral communities, fostering the



development of cooperative groups for the purposes of conducting business, coordinating grazing, or any other community development aspect the people chose.

Given the sensitivity of land use policies in this region, these organisations have chosen to first concentrate on cooperative marketing as a means to develop trust and self-help within target groups. As this trust builds, more and more families are willing to join. In one project site we have successfully facilitated a change in grazing patterns, towards one where groups agree to coordinate labour and timing of movement across their entire territory. In addition, the group is trying a rotational grazing system within their winter pasture areas. Other sites are in planning stages and will begin implementation of grazing plans in 2006.

Factors for success are numerous. First, we try to select communities with good local leadership and little evidence of conflicts over resource use. These communities then serve as examples for neighbouring regions. In addition, due to recent efforts by the Chinese government to develop the western regions of China, these once inaccessible areas are now reachable by roads and telephone lines. This has facilitated more flow of information and resources. Also, the government is now strongly encouraging cooperative development and will soon pass the Professional Economic Cooperatives policy, the general purpose of which is to reduce market risk and uncertainty for marginalised rural populations.

Another less obvious factor that contributes to our programme's success is that local decision-makers in our project areas have managed to apply indigenous solutions to implementing difficult policies. For example, in one area where the entire township was slated for resettlement, the local population refused to move and so the county decision-makers simply met government quotas by selecting volunteer households from all the other townships. This reflects respect for the wishes of local communities and officials seek alternatives to what is mandated in print. This is in contrast to other areas where local communities have been forced to comply with the 'letter of the law'.

Constraints are numerous but not insurmountable. For one, the status of both international and domestic NGOs is still sensitive in China, limiting our ability to affect policy change. However, with the proper approach, policy advocacy can be successful and not perceived as a threat. We also face issues of illiteracy and lack of infrastructure in remote nomadic areas, which hamper effective social service delivery such as health care. However, by building the skills within our groups, we hope to help overcome some of these barriers. Our philosophy is to empower the communities to gain the skills to plan and advocate for their own development, in a manner that is fitting and appropriate to Tibetan ecology and culture.

### **Acknowledgements**

The author wishes to thank the Bridge Fund, the Tibet Poverty Alleviation Fund and Winrock International for providing the opportunity to put these ideas into practice, supporting approaches as described in this article. These organisations support nomadic communities by promoting sustainable pastoral development in the remote regions of the Tibetan Plateau.

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TITLE: Developing Alternatives to Resettlement for Pastoralists  
on the Tibetan Plateau

SOURCE: Nomadic Peoples 9 no1/2 2005

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