

*Academic Dialogue*  
**Aiming at better Quality of Life  
in Rural Areas**

September 29<sup>th</sup> 2017



# BACKGROUND

For more than 30 years the Hanns Seidel Foundation (HSS) has been working in the field of development cooperation in China. Through the development of strategies and implementation of pilot projects for rural development, the Hanns Seidel Foundation aims at improving the quality of living and working conditions of China's rural people, with an emphasis on environmental protection and citizen participation.

As a part of HSS project, successful Bavarian rural development approaches are discussed in academic and research institutions in China, and are adapted to the specific local context. The experiences of the pilot projects are also incorporated into the political decision-making process. Thus, eminent Bavarian approaches to rural development are successfully applied in policy formulation and implementation, and academic training in China.

Universities in China play a significant role in sustainable rural development. In addressing the rural development issues in China, universities contribute to increase awareness of indispensable functions of rural areas in balanced regional development of the country. The event pursued an active dialogue between Bavarian and Chinese academic institutions, bringing together long-standing central project partners, i.e. Technical University of Munich, Renmin University of China, and the Bavarian Academy for Rural Areas. The aim of the event was to exchange knowledge and understanding of equitable living conditions in rural areas and draw useful conclusions. The discussion mainly focused on strategies for improving quality of life in rural areas.

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Director of HSS Representative Office Shandong,  
P.R. China

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**Prof. Dr.-Ing. Winrich Voß**  
Land and Real Estate Management,  
Leibniz University of Hannover

**Prof. Qu Weidong**  
Renmin University of China

**Prof. Dr. Walter de Vries**  
Chair of Land Management,  
Technical University of Munich

**Dipl.-Ing. Karl Spinder**  
Landscape Architect

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## EQUIVALENT LIVING CONDITIONS AND QUALITY OF LIFE IN ALL SUB-REGIONS: CHALLENGES

### WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION TO THE PROGRAMME

**Dr.-Ing. Michael Klaus**

Director of HSS Representative Office  
Shandong, P.R. China



The event was officially opened by Dr.-Ing. Michael Klaus, Director of HSS Representative Office Shandong, China. He expressed his delight to address the first Academic Dialogue under the cooperation between the Hanns Seidel Foundation and China. He sincerely thanked Ms. Silke Frank for her contribution to the event and acknowledged the support of the Bavarian Academy of Rural Development.

In his introductory speech Dr. Klaus described the challenges that China is facing in the process of urbanization. He emphasised the fact that the challenges for water protection and food security pertain primarily to the rural areas and there is no common approach to deal with these problems.

Dr. Klaus said that the idea of organizing the Academic Dialogue was developed during the Summer School at Renmin University in July 2017. He considered the event as a practical platform for Chinese academics to develop an enhanced understanding of Bavarian rich experiences in inequitable living conditions in rural areas, which could have the potential to influence policy-making in China.

### **‘Equivalent living conditions and quality of life in all sub-regions: Challenges’**

**Prof. Dr.-Ing. Winrich Voß**

Land and Real Estate Management,  
Leibniz University of Hannover



Prof. Voß stressed that safeguarding of equivalent living conditions in all sub-spaces has always been a central concern of German Spatial Planning. He mentioned that in Germany the only Federal State to adopt the issue of equivalent living conditions at constitutional level is the State of Bavaria. He discussed the Model of Spatial Monitoring System to determine the regions with above average living conditions. Based on six dimensions (areas of life) – demography, economy, job market, wealth/ prosperity, infrastructure and housing market – the evaluation was conducted in 361 regions. The evaluation found that 26 regions (7%) have below average and 32 regions (9%) have above average living conditions. 47 regions (13%) were found with far below average living conditions whereas 303 (84%) regions having balanced living conditions.

Prof. Voß further discussed the dilemma in defining the terms ‘urban’ and ‘rural’. These two terms are often ambiguous as the definitions vary not only in scale, but also in philosophy. Later on he discussed the structure of Research Centre TRUST – Transdisciplinary Rural and Urban Transformation at Leibniz University of Hannover and its future research in identifying a new approach in defining ‘rural’ and ‘urban’.

Prof. Voß prescribed a list of recommendations for structurally weak regions. He stressed the importance of investment in mobility, educational opportunities, medical services, and creation of workplaces. He reckoned that structurally weak regions can take benefit from regional partnership and transdisciplinary approach. He further mentioned the importance of urban-rural solidarity, cost efficiency and infilled development. In conclusion, he said that cooperation in (rural and urban) land management can help to create tools for balancing structural disparities at local level.

### **‘Strategies and practices of land consolidation in metropolis: a case study of Shanghai’**

**Prof. Dr.-Ing. Zhengfeng Zhang**  
Renmin University of China



Prof. Zhang provided a focused discussion of land consolidation and its underlying strategies and practices in Shanghai. He offered a wider perspective on the challenges related to land (i.e. land shortage and reduction of cultivated area, loss of ecological space, rural hollowing and labour loss) and stressed that land consolidation is an effective countermeasure in addressing these challenges.

Prof. Zhang explained four key strategies and practices of land consolidation in Shanghai. First, formulation of countryside unit planning, which pays more attention to the land use and layout of various facilities outside CCA. Second, promotion of construction land reduction outside CCA in order to improve land use efficiency and resolve environmental problem. Third, building Country Park in order to add more ecological space and improve the local culture and landscape resources. Fourth, developing multi-function cultivated land consolidation including production function, ecological function and recreation function.

Prof. Zhang said that land consolidation in China is now experiencing new adjustment stages. He emphasised the fact that land consolidation in new era should change its focus from agricultural land to construction land, from single project area to whole region, and from increasing cultivated land to enhancing the quality of agricultural land, with a view to establishing a sound land consolidation system appropriate to the Chinese context.

## **‘Geospatial information dilemmas and opportunities for measuring and assessing quality of life in rural areas’**

**Prof. Dr. Walter de Vries**

Chair of Land Management, Technical University of Munich



Prof. de Vries started the presentation with a core question – ‘do presently available maps tell the complete or the right story for rural policy-makers / making?’ He argued that GDP is not enough to measure the quality of life. He demonstrated that it is important to have various geospatial indicators (e.g. GDP versus debt, school dropout versus workers without qualification) that summarize the quality of life, assisting and supporting the policy makers to deal with current and future problems.

With the examples of New Delhi and Mexico Prof. de Vries stressed that official statistics are often outdated and inaccurate, which can’t depict the reality. But, technology allows setting deeper statistics. Quality of life also has to do with density of information. Therefore, subjective and objective data link is needed. He emphasised that power of and within the geospatial system to reflect the quality of life should be properly utilized.

## **‘Aiming at better quality of life in rural areas’**

**Dipl.-Ing. Karl Spindler**

Landscape Architect



Mr. Spindler provided an insight of current project work of Hanns Seidel Foundation in Sichuan, P.R China that aims to conserve eco-landscape, protect local culture, improve citizen participation, and ensure equivalent living conditions in urban and rural areas through land consolidation. He said that land consolidation has great potential in China. The country has good ecological environment, convenient transportation and rich cultural heritage. However, there are some weaknesses i.e. low land use intensity, low efficiency in agriculture, poor infrastructure, hollowing out of the inhabitants, which can cause dilemmas for the project.

Mr. Spindler stressed that a systematic planning concept is followed for the project implementation, which guarantees citizen participation, application of new land policies, integration of different policies to attract social fund and mobilization of farmers in project areas. He further discussed the advisory works of HSS in capacity building to support the P.R. China in social reform processes. Furthermore, Mr. Spindler described different approaches (i.e. survey in several townships with village renewal and land consolidation, activating civic conversation, landscape assessment) undertaken by HSS in Sichuan.





## QUALITY OF LIFE IN ALL RURAL AREAS – NEW APPROACHES

### Discussion

The discussion was moderated by Prof. Dr.-Ing Holger Magel. It was conceptualized as a sequence of presentations. At the beginning of the discussion Prof. Magel pointed out that regional inequality is worsening within many countries, which is also evident in Germany and China. The major challenge is to find criteria and measures for overcoming inequality in terms of hard and soft infrastructures, and aspects of life. Therefore, it is not primarily a question of economy to support the rural areas, but it is first and foremost a question of human rights, dignity and territorial justice. Justice and its impact on the spatial development is a universal and perpetual mandate, which is ultimately based on universally applicable human rights and human dignity.

The discussion revolved around four issues:

- Role of Chinese universities in ensuring equitable living conditions in rural areas in China
- Projects of Hanns Seidel Foundation in China and their impacts on quality of life in rural areas
- Future of land consolidation in China
- The way forward to better quality of life in rural areas



The key messages from the ensuing discussion are:

### ***Role of Chinese Universities***

Studies about the revitalization of cities always tend to focus on larger cities. But, the challenges, which are unique to small towns, are not often recognized or addressed. Universities (i.e. Renmin University) in China seek to overcome the past tendency to research on urbanization issues as discrete problems. Their goal is to identify feasible options by which urbanization will grow through localization. Universities in China will use their expertise to strengthen their engagement in contributing to rural policy development. In China the spatial policy framework approach provides the opportunity to deal with uncoordinated and unbalanced regional development. Government is the sole decision maker and often the facts are suppressed by the decision of the government. Therefore, universities have a limited role in the decision- making process. However, universities can help government in reaching out to various stakeholders and share their expertise, knowledge and research to develop new rural development policy.



### ***HSS Pilot Projects in China and Impact on Land Use Efficiency and Better Living Conditions***

In China there is substantial land use inefficiency due to rapid industrialization and agricultural transformation. The country also faces terrible state of ecological situation. Further, the rural areas of China have experienced a drastic change in rural labour movement and agricultural land conversion, which make a critical transformation in rural livelihood. Therefore, most attention is being focused on preservation of farmland, and ecological conservation and restoration. Based on German experiences, the pilot projects undertaken by the Hanns Seidel Foundation will be setting the benchmark for better living conditions in rural areas in China through land use management and will provide scientific and practical information, and insights for stakeholders and decision makers.

### ***Measures Undertaken by HSS Pilot Projects for Capacity Development and Civic Engagement***

Through pilot projects the Hanns Seidel Foundation made substantial contributions to citizen participation and capacity development in rural areas in China. Through open-ended interviews, the rural people in the projects areas were given the opportunity to share their experiences, sorrows and hopes. The collected data were recorded and analysed. Trainings were offered to the landscape planners and assessments were undertaken. The HSS further invited the farmers and decision makers to show how the projects run and sought their opinions to improve project activities.



### ***Land Consolidation in Future***

Land consolidation has been widely regarded as an instrument for improving the effectiveness of land cultivation and agricultural production in China. It has also a profound impact on landscape patterns and ecological functions. More attention should be paid to improve the quality of ecological functions during

land consolidation. Furthermore, it has huge potential for integrating tourism into agriculture. Land consolidation can also be an effective instrument for bringing regularity in 'rural hollowing'. Though there is no uniform definition of the term 'rural hollowing', generally it refers to the phenomena of abandoned and damaged buildings in inner villages. Rural hollowing is an obstacle to the optimization of land use efficiency and has a wasteful use of rural land. Land consolidation can be undertaken with an aim to push forward rural spatial restructuring, which can eventually improve rural infrastructures and public service facilities.

### ***Future Landscape Perception in China***

The landscape is an important part of the quality of life for people everywhere, which was acknowledged by the European Landscape Convention. Therefore, landscape quality should not be confined to areas of special interest e.g. tourism, but everyday life. However, this broader concept is apparently missing in Greenways Policy in China, which is limited to serve the purpose of providing access. Therefore, it is difficult to understand how the term 'Greenways' was built and the Chinese way of defining 'landscape'. Greenways should be better connected with the places where one can have everyday leisure. River delta, drainage and irrigation system, polder techniques, which are important structures of the landscape should be taken into account while developing leisure and recreational landscape. Instead of concentrating on the country parks, landscape quality should be developed everywhere.

### ***Some Measures to Improve Quality of Life in Rural Areas***

- Rural communities cannot exist and thrive without appropriate public services and infrastructures, which are still inadequate in rural areas in China. Investment in public services and infrastructures in rural areas will contribute not only to agricultural production growth, but also to the development of rural non-farm sectors.
- The future of rural development depends to a great extent on the digital technologies, which are essential to fill the existing gap with urban areas. Evidences show that availability of high speed internet and mobile phone connection can help improve the economy in rural areas. Digitalization can further increase the level of civic engagement.
- Decentralization of service delivery institutions can improve access to services for the rural people. Devolution of responsibility for agricultural advisory services and management of natural resources can help the areas prioritize their development agenda.
- Attention should be given to water management though participatory approach, which plays a significant role in improving the livelihood of rural people.





## SUMMARY AND OUTLOOK

The academic dialogue was a large learning and thought-provoking event for all participants. There was a full range of talk on the equitable living conditions in rural areas and the way forward. In particular, to contribute to the rural policy making and development of implementation tools, presentations and discussions focused on successes and lessons learnt from different case studies.

It was **agreed** that rural development in China should not be confined to traditional land consolidation. Rural development is much more than developing agriculture and there is much new thinking on rural development.

It was **recognised** that there is no single regional development model to ensure equitable living conditions in rural areas. Regional development is a continuous process, and development measures vary across national and regional contexts. Germany and China have contextual differences and therefore, rural development approaches developed from the German perspective cannot be always applied in the Chinese context. However, there is a need for these countries to learn from each other the lessons and experiences gathered in order to formulate more effective regional development agenda.

It was **acknowledged** that academic dialogue can create a shared understanding of what is required to improve for ensuring better quality of life in rural areas. In the future, such type of academic dialogue can help China develop its rural areas more inclusively. Along with universities, other project partners should take part in the dialogue.





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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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