Policy Considerations on China’s Rural Migrants:

Helping their smooth transfer to non-agricultural activities and urban areas, and ensuring their legal rights and benefits

CASS-UNESCO Project Team*

Hundreds of millions rural migrants, Nong Ming Gong for short in Chinese, who come to urban areas for seeking off-farm jobs since the Reform, are becoming a new labor force in China in recent thirty years and an important actor to promote economic and social development in China. This is a result of Chinese reform and opening up, social development, and an important contributor to this great social transformation. These rural migrant workers are not only important contributors to build a well-off society in all respects but also a major part of Chinese working class.

I. Meanings

The issues related to rural migrants are very important for economic and social development in China. Ensuring legal rights and benefits of rural migrants are protected, improving their working, living and health conditions, and helping their transferring from agricultural to off-farm activities and urban areas orderly are practically and theoretically important to guarantee social justice and social cohesion, to facilitate balanced development between rural and urban areas and to construct a new socialist countryside, and finally to build a well-off society in all respects and a harmonious society..

That a great number of rural migrants move between rural and urban areas in order to seek off-farm activities in non-agricultural sectors will be a long-standing phenomenon. Consequently, the basic guidelines of Chinese Government, “treating equally without discrimination, providing better services and improving management, planning as whole and guiding rationally, taking actions that suit local circumstances, standing from the present and looking forward to the future”, are playing important roles in current and future work.

II. General Assessments

* The research-action project is named “Poverty Reduction among Rural Migrants in East Asia”, “Together with Migrants” for short. It was initiated by Beijing office of UNESCO and Institute of Sociology of CASS. The CASS Team include Huang Ping, Chen Xin, Ma Chunhua, Zhan Shaohua, Pan Jie, Shi Jinqun, Li Jing, and Wang Hongyan, and its local partners include Dalian Municipal Government, Diqing Prefectural Government, Zhulu County Government, China Women Daily, Institute of Population Studies, Eastern China Normal University, Institute of Sociology, Sichuan Academy of Social Sciences, Sichuan Women’s Federation, and Institute of Philosophy, Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences. This Policy Considerations is drafted by Prof. Huang Ping, Senior Research Fellow of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Director General of Institute of American Studies. The English translation is done by Dr. Ma Chunhua, Institute of Sociology, CASS, and proof-read by Prof. Huang Ping.

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In the past thirty years, China followed a development path which is seldom seen before: in a society with more than one billion populations, the economy keeps on increasing rapidly while more than 300 millions rural people have got rid of absolute poverty, and more than 200 millions rural laborers transferred from agriculture to off-farm activities and urban areas without a larger numbers of slums in cities and a large-scale international migration.

On the contrary, the rural migrants who come to urban areas for off-farm activities not only build their capacity and widen their minds, but also contribute to development and prosper urban areas, and provide a huge amount of remittances, practical skills and information to home villages and townships, which promote the economic development in rural areas. The rural migrants’ contribution to the rural and urban development become one of effective ways to industry supporting agriculture, urban areas helping rural areas and developed areas linking developing areas. In sum, the action of these rural migrants blaze a new way to reform the Urban-Rural Dualistic Structure, to solve the “san-nong wen ti”(the problems of rural economy, rural society, and rural villagers ) and to modernize China with its own characteristics.

The major issue is how to ensure that the social process which will last for a long time is fair and orderly, and ensure the development and harmony of society as a whole on the one hand and protect economic, political, social and cultural rights of rural migrants on the other. In detail, these include: (a) how to effectively and smoothly improve the situation of their employment, housing and health; (b) how to include them in the social security and social protection system gradually, or to establish these systems for them specially; (c) how to make sure they can access to medical services and insurance; (d) how to guarantee their children’s access to education system in urban areas.

III. Cooperation between different departments and sectors

How to deal with these issues is one of strategic tasks for establishing the Chinese Socialist market system, building a well-off society in all respects and a harmonious society, and balancing development between rural and urban areas. Therefore, it is not enough only to depend on government agencies, or one of governmental departments, labor and social security department and agricultural department for example. The government at all levels should attach importance to the issues and cooperate and coordinate to deal with them, and different governmental departments (such as social security department, agricultural department for example). The figure includes not only rural laborers who go to urban areas for off-farm jobs and their relatives and children, but also rural laborers who transfer from agriculture to off-farm sectors at their hometown.
department, education department, technology department, construction department, financial department and poverty alleviation department) should work closely. It is necessary to build the institutions and foster public atmosphere in favor of understanding, caring, and protecting legal rights of rural migrants, and, in order to achieve this, all parts, including government in sending and receiving places, also community and company, will be involved in providing service and management for rural migrants. These parts should support and cooperate with each other, and improve their service and management gradually.

IV. Experiences from research bases and policy suggestions
(1) Establishing the network between sending and receiving places

The findings of the project “Together with migrants” show that a rural migrant worker is an organic component of Chinese social change and urbanization. Therefore, the issues related to them should be dealt with within the framework of balanced development between rural and urban areas. An important approach is to establish the network between sending and receiving places of rural migrants, which is in favor of making use of limited resources, and decrease the cost of migration. Examples include (1) in the rural areas with plenty of surplus rural laborers, the local governments or agencies of sending and receiving of rural migrants provide the job information of sending places coordinately; (2) in sending places of rural migrants, the employers cooperated with local governmental departments to provide the basic introductive trainings (including the trainings on legal and health issues) and special trainings which meet with the requirements of jobs before the rural laborers leave; (3) The local government of sending and receiving places of rural migrants to make sure signing and actualizing the labor contract; (4) The local governments or other organizations (Women’s Federation for example) of sending places establish a station and send officers in the receiving places with a great number of local rural migrants to help them to deal with the issues, such as housing, job seeking and training, etc.

(2) Providing more training sessions

According to studies of the Project, many types of training sessions have evident positive impacts on rural migrants. It should be noted here: (1) Training sessions in neighborhood. It means training sessions are provided for rural migrants in the places which are close to their hometowns. In most cases, the township or county next to their villages are the best choices. These training sessions have better results and lower cost. The key point is who is responsible for organizing the sessions. The experiences show it is a good choice that the employers and local governmental departments cooperate and share some cost for the training, even rural migrants can afford part by themselves. (2) Simple skill training sessions which suit to local circumstances. In other words, the training sessions which are inexpensive for rural migrants
and easy for organizers to conduct are very welcomed by rural migrants. In most cases, these training sessions should be implemented in the townships or counties close to their villages. Many training sessions concerning simple skills not only save the money and investment of governments and enterprises, but also are easier to learn for the rural migrants. (3) Introductive training sessions, including basic legal and health knowledge. These training sessions not only help the rural migrants to seek off-farm activities, but also nurture their consciousness to protect their legal rights and to abide by the laws and regulations, and reduce possibility to be injured and be sick. (4) Communicative training sessions which can establish social network between trainees. For rural migrants, the contents of trainings, such as being housekeeper, sewing and cooking, are not most important. More importantly, these trainings open a public space for them to interact with each other, and help them build up self-confidence and social network. These will have profound impact in the future.

(3) Partnership between researchers and actors

Another important finding is that studies on rural migrants can and should be “partnership-like” and comprehensive, i.e., they should

(i) work closely with other studies such as studies of “san nong wen ti”, of constructing a new socialist countryside, and of balancing urban and rural areas, that is to say, in order to make the studies move forward in-depth and have wider visions, it should not exclusively deal with rural migrants;

(ii) combine with implementation of policies at different levels;

(iii) cooperate with social groups and organizations (Women’s Federation for example) at grassroots in order to make the studies with “action orientation” (including experiments), and

(iv) especially integrate with rural migrants themselves so that their opinions and requirements can be heard and their problems and difficulties found directly.

(4) Exploring complementary and win-win mechanism

The studies on rural migrants can benefit form interactions between both sides, and complementary and win-win mechanism between two sides will emerge during these processes. The experiences of the Project show that it is possible to achieve a win-win result among governmental departments, social organizations, enterprises and rural migrants. In Dalian pilot site, for instance, (a) governmental departments provides accommodation for (b) rural migrants through encouraging (c) private enterprises to contract some old buildings of
(d) public service units (shiye danwei), and therefore other governmental departments, such as Public Security Bureau, Justice Bureau, Labor and Social Security Bureau and Health Bureau, can provide training sessions and related information there. As a result, every part can benefit from this model, and are satisfied with it, especially rural migrants, because these Nongminggong Apartments are safe, clean and cheap, and they can receive trainings and acquire information in the buildings. This model not only solve the problem of the shortage of (part of) funds and delayed return after investment, but also prevent these projects from only depending on increasing investment of the governments.

(5) Transferring from agriculture to non-agricultural sectors locally

Studies of the Project (and almost all statistics) show that most of rural laborers have been seeking off-farm opportunities at local areas (local county or urban areas within provinces) from the early 1980s to present. Furthermore, most rural laborers did not get formal professions or jobs, but are more likely involved in non-agricultural activities, most of which are included in local “informal sectors”. It means that rural “surplus laborers” have to transfer from agriculture to off-farm sectors at local areas in quite long time which is realistic due to actual constraints no matter how many people are willing to get into big cities. The choices of rural migrants themselves are most rational and realistic. Any policies on promoting urbanization should consider how to promote township enterprises and county economy, increase the capacity of industries in small cities and townships to absorb rural surplus laborers, and develop local service sectors. Developing mega-cities and rush super-urbanization should be avoided.

Among the studies of the Project, the experiences of one pilotsite should be noted here: Shangri-La County, administrated by Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Yunnan Province, is developing quickly partly because of tourism. In local practices, while developing local economy and local culture with great efforts, they create conditions for local rural laborers to seek off-farm activities within county and not only provide the opportunities of starting small enterprises, such as restaurants and shops, for the rural migrants from other places, but also do not force local surplus rural laborers to seek for off-farm jobs in other provinces.

Enlarging the local employment capacity in local areas and exploiting the local potential of off-farm jobs not only can help the rural surplus laborers transfer from agriculture to non-agricultural sectors with low cost gradually and steadily but also can promote the development of county regional economy and local services.
In past 30 years of China, coastal areas and large cities develop quickly and have laid quite foundation for the future. In the future 20-30 years, if economy, society and culture of prefecture and county region with wider areas can also develop, it will become a solid foundation to build a well-off society in all-round way and construct a more harmonious society, an competent approach for rural laborers to transfer from agriculture to non-agricultural sectors, and a realistic strategy to realize supporting rural areas and avoiding the “urban diseases”.

In order to achieve these, it is necessary to not only update the strategies of development (the new strategies including more balanced development, construction of new socialist countryside, and construction of harmonious society, etc.), provide necessary and increasing investment in infrastructures, but also activate the local market with realistic models, develop local basic education (including vocational education for rural migrants) and local culture, and improve local environment so that the counties and rural areas will become the flourish areas where residents and rural migrants will be happy to live and work.

(6) Emphasizing the construction of the communities

No matter where in urban areas, such as large, middle and small cities, and the areas the counties and prefectures locates, or in rural areas, these issues should be dealt with and these policies should be actualized at the community level.

The “community” here is not only an administrative or geographical concept, but a concept of small-size society which means the people who live, work and consume here and communicate daily, who share a very basic identity, enjoy necessary security and trust each other in daily life, taking care of and supporting each other, and establish the institution and service for themselves.

If the residents, including rural migrants, can be involved in the establishment of community, strengthening their consciousness of the members of the community, build their capacities of self-governance, self-education and self-service, and form the community mechanism of mutual-help, reciprocity, and win-win, the relevant laws and policies can be actualized, the solidarity and cohesion can emerge among the members of the community. The construction of the community not only guarantees the basic social order but makes sure the residents living and working in peace and contentment and active involvement in community activities. Then the true stability and justice of society and long-term security of society can be achieved.

(7) Dealing with issues related to rural migrants within the framework of New-countryside Construction and Harmonious Society
Chinese government delivers the Concept of Balancing Development and Establishing Harmonious Society recently, and intended to achieve “Five Balanced Development” and access to comprehensive and sustainable approach of development with them as guide. One of the most important aspects of these theories is to construct new countryside. Rural migrants will play a particular important role in the process.

New-countryside construction does not mean traditional village management, but to construct rural community which in accordance with principles of socialist market in all aspects. In new-countryside, interpersonal relationship is harmonious, human beings and nature coexist harmoniously, and development of rural and urban are balanced.

It is also reported by the Project that the income of off-farm jobs are not always important for rural migrants. They attach more importance to the living and working conditions with essential respects. While there are enterprises and managers that failed to pay back wages to migrant workers in time the latter have less complaints or few conflicts with the former if the relationships between local government, enterprises, social organizations and rural migrations are harmonious. On the contrary, even the income is not too low, without a pleasant relationship, rural migrants are not satisfied, social stability cannot be guaranteed in urban areas, and their parents in rural areas always worry about their children.

The Project suggests that new community of rural migrants should be built up. Rural migrants’ community is in favor of themselves, both in the receiving places and their hometowns.

(8) Standing from the present and looking forward to the future

It will take time to solve all the problems, such as ensuring legal rights of rural migrants, improving their working, living and health conditions, establishing welfare system for them, and enrolling migrant children to formal education. To deal with these problems will become a part of building a well-off society in all aspects. While a moderate prosperous society has been built, all the problems are settled root and branch.

From this prospect, it becomes important to match the present and the future, and it is necessary to combine the hard nuts to crack at present with strategic thinking and planning. At present, it is pressing and practical to keep on ensuring that rural workers in cities are paid on time and in full, protecting employment security and health in light of Labor Law and other relevant legal requirements, providing employment information, organizing vocational
trainings on skills and knowledge of laws and health, enrolling rural migrant children to schools, improving their working and living conditions, establishing social security and welfare system for them, and helping them find off-farm jobs at local places.

Looking forward to the future, rural migrants’ issues have very to do with socio-economic development, with social and political reform, and with urbanization and harmonious society. When we discuss these issues today, we should base our discussions on the new development and challenges (such as unprecedented mobility resulted from marketization, communication and globalization) of the 21st century, and start our discussions from the longer goal of establishing harmonious society and under the guideline of balanced development. At the same time, rural-urban migration bridges the gap between rural-urban areas, east-west regions, and big cities-small townships.

Experiences of pilot sites of the Project illuminates that if we want to deal with rural migrants’ issues actually, we have to access to problem-solving approach “beyond rural areas” (promoting –but gradually - urbanization), must make the benefits from problem-solving “return to rural community” (construction of new countryside, urban areas supporting rural areas, and industry supporting agriculture), and should solve the problem “between rural and urban areas” (developing county regional economy and small cities and townships). As a result, rural migrants can not be excluded and discriminated in urban areas, and all of them will not rush to large cities.
Respecting different situation at local level and their innovation to deal with the issues under the local situation

The Project has only selected eight pilot sites in the country, in which the situations are very different. An old question about off-farm transferring process is submitted again: how to seek truth from facts and how to analyze the problems in local contexts. In other words, how to integrate the “general principle”, such as respecting legal rights of rural migrants, improving their living and working conditions, promoting urbanization orderly at local places, with local situations.

In principle, the different places should be treated distinctively, and activities should be taken according to local circumstances. Furthermore, the local innovations, including the exploration of rural migrants in practice, should be respected specially. For the Project, each pilot site has its own characteristics. They can communicate with each other and share the experiences and lessons on the one hand, and some models, which are developed by a pilot site, cannot be simply adopted by the other pilot site on the other hand.

It should be emphasized here that innovation of ethnic minority places should be acquired more respect. The Project has pilot sites in Yunnan, Sichuan and Inner Mongolia. And one of pilot sites locates in Tibetan area. The team members are impressed with the innovation of local officials and ordinary people in these ethnic places, and understand the importance to deal with rural-urban relationship, including rural-urban migration, with Concept of Scientific Development as guide. For example, in Diqing Tibetan Autonomous District, local officials are exploring how to promote local urbanization and make local people benefit from local development. In Chifeng of Inner Mongolia, local officials recognize Chifeng not only sending places but receiving places of rural migrants. Few officials in other Han ethnic places have these ideas. The practical methods can be very different in different areas.

Men and women are equal

Finally, it should be noted here that the studies on rural migrants should take gender perspective because there is increasing number of rural female laborers who join the rural-urban migration. Gender perspective does not necessarily mean feminism, but equality of female and male. Improving the services for migrants should make sure that female and male are equal. For these issues, there are plenty of experiences and traditions in China. The Project shows that female migrants have to face more difficulties when they migrate to urban areas. It is uncovered that if the industry absorbs a great number of female workers, the trainings for migrant workers should be...
arranged in terms of their situations. Comparing with their counterparts, female migrants do not have less creativity and initiatives. In some occasions, they are even more active and creative. Therefore, gender perspective does not mean “sympathy with disadvantageous group” or “helping them in charity”. If training sessions on health, legal and employment are targeted the special needs of female migrants, they will become more efficient, even get the twice result with half the effort. As a result, “the women hold up half of the sky” can emerge again under the new circumstances.