

## CHINA'S 2010 WORK FORUM ON TIBET: A TURN TOWARDS MEETING BASIC HUMAN NEEDS?

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### PRELUDE TO A NEW APPROACH: POLICY EXHAUSTION

Official Chinese policy on Tibet has long had two strands -on one hand development, on the other stability/security.

Few seem to notice they are contradictory, giving with one hand, taking with the other; creating opportunities only to restrict access to them, to those who can be trusted, who in Tibet almost always are Chinese immigrants. The internal contradictions of promoting growth while restricting Tibetan agency inevitably lead to Tibetans feeling excluded, while the promised growth benefits only the Chinese immigrants, from top officials down to Sichuanese expeasant building labourers. This contradiction is at the root of Tibetan frustrations, and is compounded by the internal contradiction of the propaganda work of the new elite in Tibet. The security state China has built in Tibet is run by a new elite class of cadres that peddles a narrative which follows a predictable trajectory, a cycle which repeats over the years. Tibetans and their friends around the world are very familiar with one part of this operatic cycle, in which the splittist Dalai clique is denounced in harsh, lurid language. This never fails to attract more money from Beijing to strengthen the security state. Then the elite gradually shifts to assuring Beijing and anyone else listening, that the Tibetan masses generally are patriotic, and support the party and want nothing to do with the tiny but ever present splittist enemy within. Eventually, through endless repetition the party elite in Tibet and in Beijing come to believe their own propaganda narrative. They are then shocked when events show Tibetans are more alienated and disenchanting than ever by the endless discrimination, exclusion and racist contempt they experience daily. So the cycle repeats.

China's policy towards Tibet has exhausted itself. The protests erupting all over Tibet were deeply embarrassing to cadre elite, who failed to keep things under local control. The provincial, prefectural and county level cadres in Tibet that China has always relied on, are manifestly unable to keep a lid on Tibetan frustrations. Within the party apparatus, this is a shameful loss of face, since the primary task of local officials is to stop protests from erupting beyond the lowest levels. Cadres are under strict orders to do whatever it takes for higher levels not to be disturbed, and this was repeated in December 2009 in the Party journal *Qiushi*. Zhou Yongkang, political and legislative committee chairman for the Party's Central Committee, said "conflict should not be handed up to a higher levels. Small problems should stay in the village, and bigger problems should stay in the township."<sup>1</sup> Recent TAR personnel changes, and accelerated retirements of senior officials, both Chinese and Tibetan, suggest a search for someone new who actually knows what is in Tibetan minds/hearts. The failure of the party's local eyes and ears to foresee the 2008 protests, despite their incessant beating of the drum of eternal vigilance against the splittist enemy, suggests a system of governance that is demonstrably bankrupt and exhausted,

prone to chronically believing its own propaganda rather than having its eyes open. Are there signs that Beijing has discovered its dual policy is contradictory and counterproductive, that it only intensifies Tibetan grief and pain? Other than a few personnel changes at the top, is there evidence that Beijing is looking afresh at Tibet?

#### A NEW WORK FORUM, AND NEW APPROACH?

The key is the Work Forum of January 2010, bringing together all party organs and government ministries with stakes in Tibet, including, for the first time, all regions, prefectures and counties designated as areas of Tibetan governance, whatever province they are in.

We are not well placed to know what went on at the Work Forum. There was a public announcement, well worth a close analysis, but it may have little to do with actual future directions, as Robbie Barnett has pointed out: "There are some signs that different ideas are circulating in the discussions, although just because the central government says certain things does not mean they will actually be implemented." (Financial Times 18 Feb 2010)

Nonetheless, the convening of a Work Forum on Tibet, only the fifth time in the past 30 years, brought together all official stakeholders, party and state, to thrash out a new policy. In itself this a sign that Beijing is facing up to its chronic failure to attain its most fundamental goal, of winning the loyalty of the Tibetan people, throughout Tibetan areas.

The inclusion of Tibetan areas beyond the Tibet Autonomous Region is itself a major step, announced by the Work Forum. It is a recognition of the emergence - unwittingly fostered by China- of a panTibetan identity that pays no heed to the 19th century Qing dynasty provincial boundary lines of convenience. While it may be that the driver of the Work Forum's single approach to all Tibetan areas is a unified paramilitary/security capacity for rapid mobilisation, the single approach overrides the provinces of Sichuan, Yunnan, Gansu and especially Qinghai, four of China's provinces that constitute the core of China's southwest and northwest. Each has become used to seeing its small Tibetan minority as peripheral if troublesome, confined to the margins, not only spatially but economically, politically and culturally. Now, in keeping with several Beijing initiatives of recent years, the centre seems to be recentralising power, in recognition that neglect of the Tibetan minorities is dangerous.

Tibetans in Tibet have long argued for policies that treat all Tibetan areas the same, and in education curricula and scientific research disciplines, they have succeeded. Rather than this being a claim to a "greater Tibet," the basis for a common policy is China's official designation of 150 counties as areas of Tibetan governance, even though only half are within the provincial unit designated the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). Not only are half the officially Tibetan counties outside TAR, more than half the Tibetan population is beyond TAR as is half the land area designated as

Tibetan.

Geographically, climatically and scientifically this larger area is the Tibetan Plateau, or in Chinese terms the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. In fact China's quest to make Tibet governable led in recent decades to an emphasis on creating a standardised Tibetan spoken and written language that transcends the mutual unintelligibility of the traditional provinces of Tibet. Tibetan curricula have long treated Tibet as one.

Likewise the publications of scientists, whether dealing with the moths of Tibet, clouds of Tibet, glaciers, pastures, permafrost or myriad other research topics, have long treated the Tibetan Plateau as a single entity.

In a world where political boundaries seldom coincide with ethnic populations, still less with natural units such as watersheds, plateaus, biomes or climatic zones, the Tibetan Plateau is a remarkable congruence, a single, coherent and internally consistent unit of language, culture, religion, geography, habitat and climate. So the restoration of a single policy is to a remarkable extent the return of a natural unit.

#### PEOPLE FIRST, PEOPLE'S WELLBEING

The rhetoric coming from the 2010 Work Forum is that fast tracked "leap over" development is the new emphasis, especially in rural areas. This may mean no change to well established policies which equate general economic growth with development, and which have long poured capital from Beijing into Tibet, only to find Tibetans feel more excluded than ever. It may well be that Beijing has been unable to reimagine its development model.

Yet there are new elements. The Work Forum did not conclude, as did past forums, with a long list of megaprojects to build huge infrastructure basics, specially dams, roads, railways, power stations, logistics hubs and urban centres. This may be because the 12th Five Year Plan for the years 2011 to 2015 will announce such big spending projects. Instead, as Zhang Yun, of the China Tibetology Research centre says, "It used to be said that first should come fast economic development and then livelihoods. But now the focus is much more on people's wellbeing." (Financial Times 18 Feb 2010)

#### THE NEW OFFICIAL SLOGAN: CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS, WITH A TIBETAN FLAVOUR

How are we to assess China's new commitment to meeting the basic human needs of rural Tibetans, whatever their province? To what extent does the public announcement coming from the 2010 Work Forum on Tibet signify a real swing away from heavy infrastructure towards income generation opportunities and social welfare that poor rural Tibetans actually need, and will appreciate? What does China's vague new slogan, of combining Chinese characteristics with Tibetan flavour, actually mean?

If basic needs and development are now to be the yardsticks of Chinese policy, Tibetans assessing China's new promises need some grounding in development economics.

We also need empirical evidence of what a shift to meeting Tibetan needs might

mean in practice, and fortunately, evidence is available. This is because the 2010 Work Forum is not the first time Chikna has promised to shift its capital expenditure in Tibet away from heavy infrastructure, towards a greater emphasis on meeting basic needs of remote, rural Tibetans. If we go back to the launch of the TAR 11th Five Year Plan in 2006, the rhetoric was similar, with clear announcements that during the five years 2006 through 2010, there would be central funding allocated to improving rural housing in TAR, and in raising rural incomes. Now, in 2010, we can look back and see what actually happened in TAR, which may now become a model for what could be rolled out in the 75 Tibetan counties outside TAR. However, we should also note that public announcements of a more “people first” growth policy are neither new nor confined to Tibet. China's leaders, under popular pressure for having so long neglected the rural poor, the health, education and income generating opportunities of those in remote areas all over China, have in recent years often announced a shift towards *yiren weiben* (people first in English, *mi rtsa bar 'dzin* in Tibetan). In practice this has not always meant much, as China has persisted in its prioritising of full speed growth and wealth accumulation, all concentrated in areas and sectors best able to maximise profits. Far from being able to allocate capital to remote areas, Beijing's willingness or ability to redistribute wealth has been constrained by the power of the richest provinces and corporations.

#### HOW DOES CHINA DO ITS 'PEOPLE FIRST' WORK IN TIBET?

The most dramatic example of the gap between rhetoric and reality is the 2009 wave of money Beijing made available, ostensibly as stimulus spending to lift the incomes of the poor, stimulate domestic demand to make up for lost export sales, and as proof of China's good global citizenship in doing more than its share, in the midst of a global financial crisis, to sustain domestic demand by rebalancing the structure of the economy towards those who have been missing out. China has sought global acclaim for this major contribution to the world's economic recovery, created by government-led investments. Yet, as we shall see later in this analytical series, the 2009 explosive growth in cheap money was hardly made available to the poor, but was largely captured by the rich, who directed it into real estate property speculation, further pushing up urban housing prices beyond the reach of the poor who migrate to cities.

First, however, to the anthropological fieldwork on China's 2006 promise to shift capital investment towards meeting basic needs of rural Tibetans in TAR. A 2010 report by American and Tibetan social scientists on villages close to Shigatse, both well-off and poor, shows in detail how China's promises are implemented.<sup>2</sup>

The 11th Five Year Plan of 2006 through 2010 (FYP11) for TAR allocated 100 billion yuan for TAR, of which one fifth was earmarked for *yiren weiben* (people first) projects, 22bn yuan, or US\$2.9 bn at official exchange rates. The other four-fifths went, as usual, to infrastructure megaprojects.

The *yiren weiben* emphasis was on housing, with 3.2 bn yuan allocated to assisting rural Tibetans in upgrading their old houses; and 12.3 bn allocated for fulfilling the Millennium Development Goal of piping safe drinking water to villages, installing biogas farm waste digesters to provide a fuel for cooking, extending mobile phone towers into rural areas, village feeder roads connecting to highways, education, health etc.

The social scientists looked most closely at the *anju gongchen* (comfortable housing programme in English, *bde sdod rnam grangs* in Tibetan) implementation in three villages where farmers already had houses, in need of renovation. Households could receive up to 20,000 yuan towards the cost of a new house, in cash and materials such as wooden beams. Since the cost of building a new house was 50,000 yuan in the poorest village and 80,000 in the richest, the “subsidy represented on average only between 15 and 20 per cent of the cost of totally rebuilding the houses.” The subsidy was not a grant but a loan, interest-free for three years, which the central government ordered Agricultural Bank of China to make to rural Tibetans who could show they had sufficient income to repay the loan.

Inevitably, many households, especially the poorest, did not dare apply for this cheap loan, for fear of being unable to repay; and in the four years monitored by the researchers 47 per cent of households in the three villages near Shigatse took up *anju gongchen* loans. This is far short of the 80 per cent officially promised when the FYP11 was announced.

#### MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE POOR?

From a development economics viewpoint, such programs are most beneficial when they specifically target the poorest households, which can be successfully done only if they receive income support. However, this program yet again bypassed the poor, as do most Chinese aid and development schemes, since they are designed on a semi-commercial basis, as soft loans that do need to be repaid. In fact, the researchers emphasise the extent to which the ability to take such a loan is tied to the young adults in the family leaving to migrate to cities in Tibet where they can earn income, often as construction labourers in Lhasa's boom.

The 47 per cent of households that did take loans usually did not renovate but built completely new two-storey houses with concrete floors and many glass windows, confident that they could rely on much more than farming as income to pay most of the construction cost, then repay the loan. This locks families into having the healthiest members away for long periods, and contributes to the decline of farming, and the added burden on women as the men are away, “going for income.” (*yongbab la droya* in Tibetan). Again, from a development perspective, there are unintended consequences which in fact are quite predictable, but seldom considered when such projects are designed. As the researchers -Mel Goldstein, Geoff Childs and Bhuchung Wangdi- point out, the purpose of such projects is not so much poverty alleviation as “inculcating loyalty.”

This suggests some of the difficulties such statist interventions face, in remote areas. The amounts of money allocated by Beijing to the FYP11 rural wellbeing program in TAR are enormous. The 22 billion yuan announced in 1996 would be about 55,000 yuan per rural household, yet clearly actual households saw very little of such largesse. If that amount was given to each rural TAR Tibetan, including children, spread over five years, it would add 2000 yuan to annual incomes that, on Chinese statistics, were only 2167 yuan per capita in 2007.<sup>3</sup> In other words, handed directly to rural Tibetans, their incomes would have doubled at once, each year for five years. Clearly this did not happen.

Now, in 2010, we are about to see a new Five Year Plan rolled out, the 12th, for the years 2011 to 2015. If the 2010 Work Conference is a guide, the FYP12 sums will be even greater, and such schemes will now cover all Tibetans areas, in and beyond TAR. So it is worth looking closely at where Beijing's money went, and what the outcomes were.

The concept of “people first” development does suggest programs designed to meet actual needs, which can only be known to the state through the involvement of local populations in project design. This does not happen in Tibet. Cadres do not ask the masses what they want.

But the new approach does now target village households, with extra sums made available to the poorest households. However, in practice, the poorest seldom are able to make the required co-payments, or borrow money available through soft loans, since they cannot confidently be sure of having sufficient surplus income when repayment of loans is due.

Likewise, recent programs ostensibly targeted to help poor schools have, in Tibet, often failed. This is because a poor county government is required to provide a matching sum but is unable in practice to match the funds on offer from Beijing, so they forfeit what on paper is on offer. If our concern is basic needs, people first, this is an important failure, since so many Tibetan families are extremely poor, often because farming, pastoral nomadism and semi-nomadism in Tibet are inherently risky due to a highly variable climate which is now becoming more extreme.

The social scientists in the villages close to Shigatse investigated other aspects of China's “people first” programme. Basic health insurance was introduced, which enabled rural families to be reimbursed much of the costs of being admitted to a hospital ward for serious illness, up to 550 yuan. This is not a large amount if a serious illness is to be treated, but much better than having to pay all hospital costs upfront and in advance, which is what Tibetans have had to do when they could get a sick person to a distant hospital. Direct income support for poor parents, and for the elderly, has begun, though the amounts paid are modest. From a development perspective, direct income payments are better able to reach those in most need than the past approach of promoting general economic growth, in the expectation that something would trickle down to the poor.

#### FATTENING CHICKENS AND SHEEP

Considerable central capital investment has also gone into income generating schemes that satisfy the demand in nearby cities of Tibet for meat. In China, meat consumption in 1980 was 13.7 kilos per person, and in 2005 had jumped to 59.5 kg per capita.<sup>4</sup> Chinese immigrating to Tibet always assume Tibet is a land of meat, and are often disappointed that pastoral nomadic production has barely commercialised and is far from having industrialised.

One of the official projects initiated in a wealthy village close to urban Shigatse was the fattening of chickens for slaughter, with central funding available to assist villagers to construct chicken coops. A Sichuanese contractor two or three times a year brings in a huge number of baby chicks from Sichuan, passes them on to the Tibetan women who do the work of rearing the chicks (while the men are away on construction sites in Shigatse and Lhasa), and he then collects the fattened chickens for slaughter three months later. Each household was given cash and materials costing at 8000 yuan to construct their chicken coop, plus chicken feed and the first batch of chickens. The local government claims to have spent 9 million yuan on the five participating villages, which now produce several hundred thousand chickens to be consumed in Shigatse, increasing family incomes by 1500 to 2000 yuan per year. As the social scientists say, this is “enormously expensive” and hard to replicate in villages that lack quick access to Tibet's fast growing cities.

This is not the first time development institutions in Tibet have proposed chicken farming as a quick way to increase rural incomes, but Tibetans have been reluctant to raise animals specifically for slaughter. There was also a sheep-fattening program in Sogang, one of the villages studied, which “was not very successful.” The reason the sheep feedlots failed says much about whether such income generating ideas are adapted to the realities of Tibet. Two basic realities are that, with a scattered population, labour has always been short, especially in the brief growing season, and this has fundamentally shaped the practices of both pastoral nomadism and farming. Yet the sheep fattening project was highly labour intensive, requiring construction of new pens, and the sowing of ploughed land with lentil seeds for fodder to feed to the sheep. Significant returns on this investment of money and labour were possible only if larger flocks were maintained, which in turn required hiring shepherds to graze them on summer pastures at a distance from the village. All of this came at a time when the customary labour shortage had become chronic due to the routine migration of young men to the cities seeking construction labouring incomes. In other words, the best that can be said about such a program is that it came at least 10 years too late to keep people on the farm, and was not designed with Tibetan conditions in mind.

The FYP11 rural programmes also provided central funding for repairing and extending irrigation channels, building pumping stations and reservoirs, subsidising the purchase of tractors and other farm machinery, subsidising fertiliser costs, even paying modest amounts for land planted with traditional barley, or newer varieties of wheat.

However, even if all these payments are added, the total comes to nothing like the 22 bn yuan allocated under FYP11 for TAR rural “people first” development. As for the rest, the most plausible explanation is that, in Andrew Fischer's words, it is “boomerang aid”, which goes back to China, having had very little impact in Tibet.

When Lodi Gyari, the Dalai Lama's special envoy in Washington sums up the 2010 Work Forum, he says: “If we take away the political slogans, many of the issues that have been prioritised by the forum are similar to the basic needs of the Tibetan

people outlined in our memorandum.” This hopeful reading may be right. When the 12th Five Year Plan for 2011 through 2015 is announced, covering all Tibetan areas, we will see whether the FYP11 program has become the model for “people first” development throughout Tibet.

#### IS 'PEOPLE FIRST' GOOD DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE?

Such schemes do increase incomes of rural Tibetans, but whether they achieve good developmental results, are sustainable and culturally suited to rural Tibet is questionable. Good development practice aims at reaching the poorest of the poor, which these schemes usually fail to do. Development means enhancing the human capital of the poor, improving their literacy and general education, health and access to services, which these schemes do very little (except for providing safe drinking water to villages). Most basically, good developmental outcomes require that poor people not gamble their meagre savings, or jeopardise future earnings, by taking on more debt than they can repay. Yet the key project, to build housing, was financed by loans to be repaid by Tibetans so poor they would normally never have access to bank loans. The many who did take out loans were confident they could repay in coming years “because many in the younger generation were earning non-farm cash income as migrant labourers and felt that they would be able to earn the cash needed to repay the loans.” This is very similar to the subprime loans made to poor people in the US, which also offered a year or two with little or no repayments. Poor Americans and poor rural Tibetans gambled on being able to repay, but often failed.

How great is the risk that the urban construction boom in Lhasa and Shigatse will dry up, and off-farm income opportunities will disappear? Much depends on the ongoing willingness of Beijing to pump ever more capital into construction projects, and there are reasons to question whether this can be done in future as vigorously as at present. That is the subject of a separate forthcoming report on China's state capitalism. Even if the city construction boom persists, Tibetans compete with poor Chinese immigrants, mostly from Sichuan; and there is much evidence of immigrants muscling Tibetans aside, or using connections to get preferentially hired. To say the least, the optimism of young rural Tibetan men is risky. It assumes endless growth, and unending opportunity to gain a foothold in the market economy, doing unskilled work. Many young rural Tibetans are already heavily indebted, having already taken loans to buy trucks or tractors, which do make profits in an expanding economy, but may not if the boom stalls.

These are dangers young rural Tibetans are not well equipped to assess. On one hand, the danger is that China's centrally-driven boom slows or stalls, taking away today's opportunities of “going for income.” On the other hand, if China's plans for Tibet succeed in urbanising at a fast pace, new entrepreneurs with more capital and technology available to them will take over the chicken and sheep fattening feedlots, squeezing out small scale Tibetan businesses. This is exactly what has happened to China's chicken industry, according to the UN Food & Agriculture Organisation: “Over recent decades, China has seen an enormous increase in production of poultry



meat and eggs. Dramatic improvements in transport infrastructure since the mid-1980s have facilitated the rapid intensification of the poultry sector. Railways are especially important for feed distribution and roads for transport of poultry products. In 1985, production was dominated by more than 150 million small-scale poultry farmers, each keeping a few birds to supplement other farming activities. Since then, there has been a rapid increase in intensification, with a trend towards fewer, larger, privately owned operations. Between 1996 and 2005, some 70 million smallscale poultry farmers left the sector. Over the same period, largescale operations (with annual output of more than 10 000 birds) expanded their share of production from about onequarter to one-half. Today, the commercial broiler market is dominated by large, integrated companies that control the entire production and marketing chain: feed, breeding, fattening and processing. Between 1985 and 2005, the proportion of farming households that kept poultry fell from 44 percent to less than 14 percent. However, backyard producers play a marginal role, if any, in meeting burgeoning market demand. As food marketing channels extend their reach ever further into the rural areas, and nonfarm employment options increase, the need for rural households to keep poultry is declining. In China, the livestock sector in general is becoming less important as a source of income for small-scale farmers. The contribution of this sector to incomes fell from 14 percent in 1990 to 9 percent in 2005. In addition, rural populations are reported to be becoming less tolerant of the nuisance, such as flies and odour, caused by backyard livestock.”<sup>5</sup>

#### TODAY'S INCOME SCHEME IS TOMORROW'S URBANISATION

There are wider criteria relevant to assessing the merits of Beijing's “people first” projects in rural TAR. Projects which raise incomes and even achieve development for the poor still need to be assessed in terms of their long term trend. In the long term, China is urbanising, at an amazing pace, and all China's planning strategies equate urbanisation with wealth accumulation. This affects rural Tibet too. At what point will the young men labouring on building sites in Lhasa consider themselves to belong to Lhasa, only visiting their rural village occasionally? At what point will rural chicken coops be replaced by industrial scale chicken factories, putting small scale producers out of business? The trend, always, is for bigger scale and the competitive efficiencies that come with increased scales of production and the intensive concentrations of consumers who live in cities. China's long term plan for Tibet has for decades been urbanisation, both of Tibetans and immigrant nonTibetans, in polyglot cities in which Tibetans have no particular place.

What gets low priority in China's “people first” program for TAR is what rural economists have identified as having the biggest positive impact on poverty in rural areas. Xiaobo Zhang and Shenggen Fan, of the International Food Policy Research Institute identify the most effective way of reducing poverty, especially in remote areas of western China, is to invest in education. “Increasing public investment in the less-developed western region will lead to a decline in regional disparity. Additional investments in education and agricultural R&D (research and development) in the western region are the two most powerful ways of reducing regional inequality. The

poor own little physical capital and their most important resources are their own human capital. Therefore building human capital through education in the less developed region will enhance labour productivity and improve workers' mobility to seek better job opportunities, thereby benefiting the vast poor population residing in the region.”<sup>6</sup>

Of the 100 billion yuan announced in 2006 as the TAR FYP11 budget for centrally funded development projects, 80 per cent went, as usual, to big infrastructure projects. The remaining 20 per cent was meant for “people first” rural projects, and very little went on improving the quality, or usefulness of education to rural Tibetan families.

#### TRANSFERRING THE TAR MODEL TO OTHER TIBETAN AREAS

The difficulties of implementing such income generating programs are many, as the TAR experience during FYP11 show; but if such preferential programs are to be introduced in Tibetan counties and prefectures of Qinghai, Gansu, Yunnan and Sichuan, the objections, obstructions, opportunities for corrupt rent seeking and cadre resistance to reform will all be much greater.

This will be especially true in Qinghai, where official programs to provide housing are targeted at sedentarising pastoral nomads, at a cost of depriving them of their livelihoods, herds and rights to use land, all taken away in the name of watershed conservation. This is far from a disinterested poverty alleviation programme in which the state has no stake. Qinghai cadres have been particularly unyielding in their attitude towards the basic needs of the pastoral nomads who in turn failed to commercialise meat production, dashing Chinese dreams of Tibet as a source of endless meat.

It is hard to imagine a change of direction, after decades of restricting herd size, land size, family size, and nomadic mobility; to suddenly enhancing Tibetan livelihoods.

So we need to understand the capacity, at provincial, prefectural and county levels, for the entrenched bureaucracy to both resist Beijing, and to divert official funding to their own ends. We need to understand the alternative opportunities such officials have to enrich themselves by capturing official funds. We need to look at the profit opportunities in today's China, and where all the 2009 stimulus money, publicly flagged for increasing rural incomes, actually went.

The new focus on rural incomes will now include the millions of poor rural Tibetans living not in TAR but in Qinghai, Sichuan, Yunnan and Gansu. If there is serious intent behind this rhetoric, it means overriding those provincial vested interests, and a significant shift in allocation of finance for rural development. Nowhere would such a shift be greater than in Qinghai, a huge area rapidly desertifying which counts Tibetans as only 19 per cent of the population, but by area 95 per cent of the land is designated as Tibetan. A large immigrant population of Han Chinese and Hui Hui

Muslim Chinese are crowded into the lowlands of eastern Qinghai, just upriver from Lanzhou, the capital of Gansu. Above these valleys is the vast plateau of Tibet, across which stretch China's only effective all-weather transport links to TAR and Lhasa.

The reality of Qinghai today is that four fifths of the population live either in the capital, Xining, or within 150 kms of Xining, so the remaining fifth, which happens to be the Tibetan fifth, can be largely ignored or even displaced by statist programs to grow grass to conserve watersheds. Although Xining in 1949 had a population of 70,000 and was little more than a camel market and Muslim warlord base, it is now among the countless Chinese cities of a million people. Party cadres in Qinghai have long made full use of this recent population shift, and the eclipse of the Tibetans. Qinghai is depicted as a multi-ethnic province in which Tibetans have no special place. If anything, the scatter of the Tibetans across such huge stretches of alpine semi-desert means they must wait their turn for development, since other areas, being more densely settled, are more easily developed with the finances available.

If there really is a new policy, from the central leaders, promoting people first rural development, especially among rural Tibetans, there will be entrenched opposition from many vested interests. Almost every Qinghai provincial level bureaucracy has a strong stake in extending agricultural knowledge, industrialisation, hydropower, highway construction etc to the areas already best favoured, in and around Xining, and they can turn to conventional economics of location to back them, since the areas of most intensive Han and Hui Chinese Muslim settlement also happen to be closest to the rest of the Chinese economy, with the best linkages. By comparison, the Tibetan areas have attracted very little provincial or national funding, unless a national highway or rail route runs through. Schools and primary health clinics are appallingly poor and low standard, since they have to rely almost entirely on locally raised funds.

Qinghai cadres learned to be adept in eliciting funding from central leaders, not by forever depicting the Tibetans as splittists, as in TAR, but by defining Qinghai as "China's Number One Water Tower". China's two great rivers, the Yellow (*Huang He* in Chinese, *Ma Chu* in Tibetan) and the Yangtze (*Changjiang* or *Dri Chu*) both rise in Qinghai, as does the Mekong as well. Despite Qinghai's increasing aridity, these rivers continue to flow, due largely to their origins in glacier fields now rapidly shrinking. This gave Qinghai a place in China's national imaginary. Eventually that led to a 21st century policy of *tuimu huancao*, closing pastures to grazing, to grow more grassland. The Tibetan nomads were evicted from their lands, with no redress, officially labelled "ecological migrants" who had patriotically volunteered to sacrifice their livelihoods for the greater good of conserving the watersheds of the Sanjiangyuan, the source of the three great rivers.

Qinghai policy towards rural Tibetans has alternated between neglect and punitive interventions to restrict how many children a family may have, how much land nomads may lease, how big a herd nomads may graze, and now whether nomads have any land at all, or must live on a reservation, built of cinderblock, in the middle of nowhere, their entire livelihood now banned.

If Qinghai were to genuinely turn towards meeting the basic human needs of its one million rural Tibetans, there is a huge backlog to remedy. Among the more urgent unmet needs are the high rate of parasitic infectious disease, among the highest in the world, a result of overcrowding and lack of basic hygiene education; malnutrition among children with resulting stunted growth, poor schools that produce poor students and ongoing high rates of illiteracy. The list of basic needs an increasingly wealthy China has ignored is long.

We also need to understand the accumulated cost to rural Tibetans in Qinghai and elsewhere outside TAR, of persistent neglect and under-investment in basics such as education, and rehabilitating degraded grasslands. The experts say education is the best possible investment, in poor areas of China, in increasing incomes and alleviating poverty. But spending on poor schools remains the responsibility of poor counties, poor townships and poor parents. In Qinghai in recent years, far from adapting the school year to the seasonal production cycle of both farmers and pastoral nomads, the schools have extended not the summer holidays, when children can help parents with production, but the winter holidays instead. The reason is simple. The schools are so poor, their facilities so rudimentary, that children freeze in unheated classrooms that often have no windowglass, no desks or stools, and no canteen where children can sit indoors to eat. Some schools even struggle to collect enough dried animal dung as fuel for heaters to keep at least the staffroom warm. The result of such dire poverty is that winter holidays are stretched, in recognition of the reality that children chilled to the marrow cannot learn.

China's 2010 Work Forum did say all Tibetan areas from now on will be included in the fast track development programs. If Beijing is serious about this, it will mean major behavioural changes in attitude among cadres at provincial level and below, if there is to be anything like a "people first" approach. In TAR, where almost all rural people are Tibetan, and the eyes of the world are watching how China treats Tibetans, a new 'people first' approach has been trialled over the FYP11 years of 2006 to 2010, with mixed results.

But in rural Qinghai, rural Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan, Tibetans are small minorities, competing with other neglected communities, often extremely poor; all of whom have long been ignored by cadres focussed exclusively on wealth creation opportunities in the cities. A new deal for rural Tibetans in these areas, if the Work Forum is serious, will be hard to achieve, going against a well established grain.

This analysis suggests the 2010 Work Forum's inclusion of all Tibetan areas will be problematic, and strongly resisted by cadres well practiced in diverting funds away from Tibetan areas. If the Work Forum is serious about its new approach, and serious about the slogans of development putting people first, Tibetans need to assess the forthcoming 12<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan, soon to be announced, with a clear understanding of China's long term goal of urbanising Tibet. We also need to know more about development, what works and what doesn't, to appreciate the unique situation of poor rural Tibetans who are to be the target of FYP12 programs in the years to 2015.

1Warning as unrest grows, Radio Free Asia 17 Feb 2010,  
<http://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/warning-02172010112910.html>

2Melvyn Goldstein, Geoff Childs and Buchung Wangdi (Puchung Wangdui), Beijing's 'People First' development initiative for the Tibet Autonomous Region's rural sector - a case study from the Shigatse area, China Journal #63, Jan 2010, 58-75

3Tibet statistical yearbook 2008, Table 8-18, Per capita living expenditure of rural households p 129

4UN Food & Agriculture Organisation, The State of food and agriculture: Livestock in the Balance, p 11, 2009

5UNFAO Livestock in the Balance, 2009, p 44

6Xiaobo Zhang and Shenggeng Fan, Public investment and regional inequality in rural China, 176-196 in Shenggeng Fan ed., Regional Inequality in China, Routledge, 2009