



## Identifying risk factors of urban–rural conflict in urbanization: A case of China



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### ABSTRACT

Urban and rural areas are two different yet coexisting systems. Developing countries such as China have been undergoing a rapid urbanization process. However, urbanization often causes competition for land resources between urban and rural areas, and such competition can result in conflicts between the two systems. To identify the risk factors of urban–rural conflict, this paper utilizes a research framework including content analysis, brainstorming and semi-structured interviews. The results indicated that the main risk factors between urban and rural areas comprise conflicts in property, resources and development. Suggestions are proposed to reduce the conflicts occurring between urban and rural areas during the urbanization process.

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### Introduction

Throughout history, changes in food production methods have been affecting human inhabitation, which highlights the gap between urban and rural communities (Blackley, 1986; Keeble & Tyler, 1995; Tacoli, 1998). First, in the agrarian age, humans took land as the original source of production. With the need to cultivate plants, they shifted from a nomadic existence and began to settle down in fertile locations, leading to the emergence of settlements. As the agricultural technology made progress, people began to generate a surplus of agricultural production, which provided the possibility for the development of industry and commerce. Next, the populations of the settlement grew and the villages gradually evolved into towns. Finally, cities appeared and urban civilization began to spread (Zhang, Wu, & Guan, 2008).

Since the earliest markets started to appear, the population began to flow transiently, mainly in the form of migration from rural towns to cities, especially after the industrial revolution. In the past 60 years, the world urbanization rate had increased by 21% and currently more than half of the world's population are living and working in urban areas. The United Nations predicts that, at the

present rate, this proportion will reach 60% by the year 2030. China, for example, reached an urbanization rate of 50% in 2011, and it is expected that there will be 13 to 15 million people migrating to the cities each year in the next 20 years.

More than 10 million Chinese people have moved to cities from rural areas every year since the 1990s. However, whilst urbanization and urban development bring economic benefits, particularly in the short term, they also induce negative impacts on the whole society, usually by a series of risk factors, including various aspects such as the transfer of land property rights and population migration. Since the 1990s, China's rapid industrialization has aggravated urban–rural conflicts and many plots of land have been expropriated from farmers to establish a so-called “development zone” (Industrial Park). However, land is not only a means of livelihood but also a form of security for Chinese farmers— an observation echoed by Barry et al. (2007) that “*Land for the poor is a vital and non-substitutable resource. For many, it is almost their only foothold into urban life, and competition for it is intense.*” Therefore, conflicts over land inevitably occur in the process of informal settlement formation and upgrading, creating significant problems in need of solutions.

This paper aims to identify the key risk factors for urban–rural conflict in a situation of rapid urbanization. Firstly, the potential risk factors for urban–rural conflict are analyzed and confirmed by reviewing and combining different types and attributes of urban–rural conflicts. This is followed by the combined research

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approach of brainstorming and interviews to identify the key risk factors involved.

### Urban-rural conflict in urbanization

In developing countries, the rapid development of urbanization facilitates the frequent interaction between urban and rural areas, which brings profound changes to urban and rural social economic systems (Becker & Morrison, 1996; Liu & Li, 2011). However, this urban-rural relation also hides many risks. For example, since its reform and opening up in 1978, China has maintained steady and rapid economic growth while the speed of urbanization has increased rapidly. According to the latest census data in 2010, China's urbanization rate had reached 49.7%. In only 30 years, urbanization in China has caught up with what has taken 200 years to accomplish in western countries. Friedman (2006) evaluated China's urbanization process as "urbanizing at breakneck speed", meaning that China's urbanization development has reached a very dangerous level (Friedman, 2006). Lu et al.'s (2006) group named China's urbanization as the "great leap forward" urbanization and, in contrast with sustainable economic development, believes the rate of urbanization in China has the characteristics of a bubble. The resulting urbanization is extremely compressed in terms of its time dimension, and is expected to have serious consequences.

To an observer of the time issue, the city and countryside exist in a symbiotic ecological system. Rural development supports urban development and industrialization by providing surplus agricultural products, while urban areas provide industrial products for the country to meet the demands of rural areas. They are interdependent with each other. Urban-rural symbiosis can be reflected in both the market economy and planned economy. For example, in market economies, agricultural and industrial products are exchanged through the market price mechanism, which then affects resource allocation (Cohen & Cyert, 1965). In the era of planned economy, such as China before 1978, urban and rural area at the initial stage are united, equal, and mutually beneficial (Song, 1987). At that time, agriculture recovered very fast. The rapid accumulation of agricultural products ensured supply to the cities. At the same time, as farmers improved their purchasing power, so did their demand for industrial production, thus becoming main objects of urban industrial consumption. Urban and rural areas therefore peacefully coexisted.

Over time, along with the dynamic propulsion of the urbanization process, the relationship between the country and the city gradually became more competitive. In the western developed countries, urbanization started earlier, so that the advancement of urbanization involved urban boundaries spreading step by step. Then it naturally followed that urban and rural areas started to compete for land resources. At the same time, the village was a huge consumer market for the city, which made urban and rural communities engage in market competition (Hushak, 1975; Satterthwaite & Tacoli, 2003). In developing countries, the rapid development of urbanization often intensified the conflict between urban and rural areas. Since the final decade of the last century, China increased its urban population by more than 10 million people each year. In 2009, Chinese urbanization reached 46.1%. It is estimated in the next 20 years, there will be 13 million - 15 million people every year entering into the cities (Wu, Shen, Zhang, & Peng, 2010). Given this background, a large amount of rural surplus labor flocks to the city, occupying urban infrastructure. To accelerate city construction, urbanization progress was tightly enclosed and a large number of plots of rural land remained occupied (Liu & Li, 2011), which made urban residents resentful of the urban resources being grabbed by rural people. The farmers were worried that their main survival resource, namely- land, would be requisitioned. A series of prominent conflicts concerning the economy,

environment and culture then occurred. First, the urbanization process prompted the rural population the flow to the city, resulting in waves of migrant workers since the 1990's (Mei, 2008) and intensifying urban-rural employment conflict. In 2011, the China Bureau of Statistics released data showing that the national total of rural migrant workers had reached 250 million, due mainly to the large contradiction of employment between urban and rural areas. Secondly, the rural population accelerated to flow into the urban, revealing both cultural differences, and triggering social problems (Huang, 2010). The rural population was introduced to modern urban culture, causing inner discomfort and anxiety, which have become important factors in the increase in city disorder and serious crime. At the same time, the population continued to gather intensively in the city, which led to extensive pollution that is beyond the capacity of its ecosystem to absorb. As a result, the chain of pollution quickly extended to rural areas, becoming a source of rural environmental group incidents.

Lefebvre (1970) pointed out that there was a reciprocal relationship between urban and rural areas, so that the spread of urbanization would lead to rural degradation or even disappearance, especially in the case of China. This outcome would result because the development of China's urbanization was highly compressed in the space and time dimensions, and was complex in the content dimension, leading to an imbalance in development between urban and rural areas, whilst lacking enough time for resolution (Liu & Li, 2011). All these would enlarge the gap between urban and rural areas, making conflicts more visible, and increasing the likelihood of a mass disturbance. This means that, without properly solving the conflicts between urban and rural areas, it could trigger a series of risks to social stability. This not only can inhibit the urbanization process, but can also block the stable and healthy development of the economy. Therefore, in order to provide theoretical guidance for government risk management, this paper establishes a table of key risk factors collected through expert interviews to provide a constructive framework for government decisions.

### Research methodology

First, through the collation of literature and content analysis about the conflicts between urban and rural areas, the potential risk factors were identified. In China, particularly in coastal regions, there are intense conflicts between urban and rural areas due to land acquisition for urbanization. Reports that describe these conflicts can be found through various channels. Some previous studies have also presented various cases (Zhan, 2011). The literature review led to the compilation of a list of risk factors that cause the conflicts. Second, a brainstorming approach was used to evaluate these risk factors and conduct a preliminary screening. Third, semi-structured interviews were carried out to identify which of these factors were the key risk factors. The relevant experts were asked to answer five questions as shown in Appendix 1.

The processes of these research activities are illustrated in Fig. 1. From this, the key risk factors will be quantified. Even though the key risk factors were identified, it is necessary to quantify them to make the framework more operational. The factor of 'land acquisition' is taken as an example. One county carried out land expropriation X times in 2012, while there were Y relevant complaints. Thus, the frequency of land acquisition conflicts is Y/X. From this, we take a conflict intensity,  $S = Y/X$ , of 1–2 complaints in one year as 'normal', 3–5 as 'poor', and more than 5 as 'serious'.

### The type of urban-rural conflict

Urbanization is a comprehensive, natural and impersonal process. It can create conflicts frequently between people from urban and rural areas in a certain period and in any country. Urbanization

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