



# Strategic planning framework for land consolidation in China: A top-level design based on SWOT analysis



Jinming Yan <sup>a</sup>, Fangzhou Xia <sup>a,b</sup>, Helen X.H. Bao <sup>b,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Land Management, Renmin University of China, Beijing, China

<sup>b</sup> Department of Land Economy, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

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## ABSTRACT

China is in the midst of an unprecedented and critical period of strategic opportunities for land consolidation. In this process, the country has been confronted with new situations, opportunities, and serious challenges, all of which urgently require top-level design of strategic planning framework for land consolidation. Based on an SWOT analysis, we propose a strategic planning framework for land consolidation at the national level, with a focus on clarification of internal Strength–Weakness strategies and external Opportunity–Threat strategies involved in the land consolidation process. Whereas it can be concluded that land consolidation in China has not yet entered the stage of landscape-ecological pattern, it is on the brink of that stage. Thus, the proposed strategic plan should provide strong protection for continuous promotion of land consolidation through the application of a top-down and comprehensive design considering agriculture production, livelihood and ecology as comprehensive targets. Meanwhile, it should also unswervingly adhere to the “red line,” optimize the layout of urban and rural land use and propel a new landscape-ecological pattern of land consolidation. In this way, strategy-oriented support can be provided to improve land consolidation implementation and ensure that it is stable, coordinated and effective.

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## 1. Introduction

The balance between urban and rural area development has a great impact on the social and economic lives of residents. Studies in this field are of both theoretical and practical importance for public policymakers, practitioners, and academics. In China, urbanization takes on particular significance because it is an integral part of policies to manage economic transition. Consequently rural development had, for many decades, received less attention than urban development (Wang, Zhang, & Cheong, 2014). In recent years the significance of rural factors in supporting urbanization, such as food security, labor mobility, and ecological conservation, has eventually drawn increasing attention from Chinese policymakers. Unfortunately the long-time neglect of rural development has already caused some serious problems. In particular, despite the fact that China's rapid urbanization has contributed greatly to economic growth, it has also led to huge losses of farmland (Zhao,

2011). From 2002 to 2010, a total of 3.49 million hectares of new construction land were added to the existing stock, which means about 200,000 ha of cultivated land were lost annually during this period (Yan, 2010). Meanwhile, even though the Household Responsibility System (HRS)<sup>1</sup> has greatly improved agricultural productivity in the early years, it also gave rise to land fragmentation due to the limited availability of arable land. This resulted in low efficiency, high travel costs and difficulties in agricultural management (Nguyen, Cheng, & Findlay, 1996). In addition, some social problems have also been overlooked in the rural areas, such as scattered rural settlements (Xia, Yan, & Liu, 2014) and hollowed villages (Li, Liu, Long, & Cui, 2014). Left without being addressed, these issues led to further problems such as low efficiency of rural residential land use, lateral expansion of rural dwellings at the expense of farmland loss, and deterioration of rural residential environment (Liu & Liu, 2010; Wang, Liu, & Chen, 2010). To resolve

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 01223 337 116; fax: +44 01223 337 130.

E-mail addresses: [yanjinming@mparuc.edu.cn](mailto:yanjinming@mparuc.edu.cn) (J. Yan), [ark\\_xiafangzhou@hotmail.com](mailto:ark_xiafangzhou@hotmail.com) (F. Xia), [hxb20@cam.ac.uk](mailto:hxb20@cam.ac.uk) (H.X.H. Bao).

<sup>1</sup> The Household Responsibility System was introduced in 1981. Under this system the production of agricultural goods and the management of farmland are entrusted to individual farming households through long-term contracts (Tan, Heerink, & Qu, 2006).

these issues while sustaining satisfactory economic growth, the Chinese government has been exploring strategies to maintain a balance between rural and urban development. An important strategy is the “New Rural Construction” scheme (NRC)<sup>2</sup> put forward in 2005 by the central government with a clear focus on improving rural living conditions during the rural residential land consolidation process. Land consolidation is a crucial step to realize this plan.

In this paper, land consolidation is defined as a process by which segmented land parcels are integrated to form centralized and continuous lands in areas where the lands are not efficiently used, misused, unused or damaged by production, manufacture or natural disasters (Yan, Xia, & Li, 2012). Land consolidation aims to protect farmland, improve the “New Rural Construction” and urban–rural integration development. Land consolidation enlists the idea of the trinity of quantity control, quality management as well as ecological management and protection to improve land utilization efficiency. To meet the demands of the Chinese land reform as a whole and as an important aspect of the new urbanization strategy, it should be noted that China is in the midst of an important period of strategic opportunities for land consolidation as an integrated element of its economic and social development. At present, the twelfth five-year (2011–2015) economy and social development period has almost come to an end and the thirteenth five-year (2016–2020) period needs a definite strategic planning framework for land consolidation (SPFLC) particularly at both the “top-down” and “bottom-up” views.

Thus this paper aims to address issues including the absence of current SPFLC studies, as well as the blurred background analysis, unclear strategic planning framework, confusion of objectives and tasks, ambiguous regional division and inadequate guarantee measures associated with land consolidation. For the first time, we designed SPFLC in China at the national level to guarantee China's food security, as well as to strike a balance between the maintenance of ecological systems and promotion of urban–rural integration. In this paper, we firstly discuss the features and approaches of land consolidation and the urgency of SPFLC design in China. Applying SWOT analysis to the design of strategic planning framework for land consolidation, we provide an account of the historical and current practice of land consolidation practices in China to analyze its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. We then proposed an SPFLC that aims to ensure that land consolidation is scientifically based, resolves the resource bottleneck and ensures that land consolidation is pertinent and stable. The rest of the paper is organized as follows. An SWOT analysis of land consolidation in China is given in Section 2, followed by a strategic planning framework for land consolidation presented in Section 3. Section 4 provides conclusions and discussions on policy implications.

## 2. An SWOT analysis

### 2.1. The practice of land consolidation in China

Being considered as an alternative to mainstream balance development, land consolidation, which has proven effective

particularly in creating better livelihood in rural and urban areas and improving the sustainable use of resources and public facilities, has been taken as a particular kind of rural development instrument (Li et al., 2014; Miranda, Crecente, & Alvarez, 2006). In addition, land consolidation has been widely regarded as a tool for improving the effectiveness of land cultivation and for supporting rural production (Sklenicka, 2006; Van Dijk, 2007). It is also a useful tool for facilitating environmental management (Crecente et al., 2002; Gonzalez, Alvarez, & Crecente, 2004; Van Ier, 2000) and other social and economic issues related to managing the development of rural areas (Wittlingerova & Kriz, 1998).

Due to the large population and limited land resources, the loss of good quality agricultural land to urban and rural settlement expansion is one of the most discussed resource issues in China (Ding, 2003; Li & Wang, 2003; Lin, 2010; Lin & Ho, 2003). The loss of agricultural land threatens the grain security of the whole country, while excessive control of urban expansion can also have adverse effects on the development of industrialization and urbanization (Li et al., 2014). These two challenges are difficult to reconcile, but one important solution which is widely accepted by the society is improving the efficiency of land use in both urban and rural areas. Thus land consolidation could be an important approach for sustainable development and spatial restructuring for the city and countryside unification (Huang, Li, Chen, & Li, 2011; Long, 2014; Long, Li, & Liu, 2012; Reerink & Van Gelder, 2010; Sorensen, 2000; Van Dijk, 2000).

Land consolidation has been implemented in China since the mid-1990s and normally is carried out by executing the land consolidation projects (LCPs). From 2006 to 2010, 124,085 LCPs funded by the national and provincial government were approved and the total areas of these projects were 110,600 km<sup>2</sup> (Zhang, Zhao, & Gu, 2014). Meanwhile, more than 115,127 LCPs were competed, with great changes occurring to LCPs' scope, objectives, content and pattern. Originally, the scope of consolidation extended only to the development and consolidation of scattered lands, but it has evolved into a process that involves integrations of fields, water, roads, forests and villages. The consolidation objective started as the simple goal of supplementing cultivated land but has evolved into the protection of farmland and participation as a coordinated element of China's NRC and the overall process of development of urban and rural areas. Previously, consolidation focused on enlarging the area of cultivated land, but this focus transformed into comprehensive management, comprising “quantity control, quality management and ecological management” (Xia, Yan, & Liu, 2014).

Previously, China had launched the “National Land Consolidation Plan (2011–2015)” on 27 March 2012 with the aim of constructing 26.67 million ha high-quality farmland to ensure national grain security and consolidate 300 thousand ha rural residential land to rationalizing rural settlement (Li et al., 2014). However, the “National Land Consolidation Plan (2011–2015)” has almost come to an end and land consolidation in China need a new strategic planning framework for a new period (2016–2020) since the social and economical situation has undergone tremendous changes in a large-scale urbanization process (Wang et al., 2014). Further, China plans that another more than 26.667 million hm<sup>2</sup> of high-quality, stable-yield farmland will be added during the 13th Five-Year Plan (2016–2020). The total area will reach 53.334 million hm<sup>2</sup> by 2020, accounting for more than 50% of the national basic farmland. Therefore, 2.64 million hm<sup>2</sup> of cultivated land will be supplemented by consolidation, including 1.19 million hm<sup>2</sup> from agricultural land, 0.4 million hm<sup>2</sup> by reclamation of damaged land and 1.05 million hm<sup>2</sup> from unused land suitable for cultivation. Moreover, a total of 0.3 million hm<sup>2</sup> of rural settlement will be consolidated during the 12th Five-Year Plan, with an additional 0.45 million hm<sup>2</sup> to be consolidated during the 13th Five-Year Plan,

<sup>2</sup> NRC is designed to promote comprehensive and coordinated sustainable development of the economy and society. This strategy focuses on addressing issues that lead to low income growth for farmers, poor agricultural production conditions, among other ways in which rural development does not meet the needs of farmers. The operative principles involve improvement of agriculture productivity, lifestyle, rural civilization, village improvement and democratic management. The strategy ultimately aims to achieve economic prosperity throughout a civilized and harmonious Chinese countryside, including establishing good facilities and maintaining a beautiful environment.

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