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Review

Governments' functions in the process of integrated consolidation and allocation of rural–urban construction land in China

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores key issues associated with integrated consolidation and allocation of rural–urban construction land (ICARUCL) in China. Based on a critical review of the literature and analysis of selected case studies, we identify barriers to effective ICARUCL implementation, which result principally from shortcomings in governance at the central and local levels. A framework for more effective governmental functions, aimed at addressing the challenges associated with the ICARUCL process, is then developed. We argue that better integration of government functions is required, in order to address such concerns as widely divergent socio-economic development levels within metropolitan regions and diverse desires and needs of relevant stakeholders. Key areas of concern regarding effectiveness of the ICARUCL implementation process are the external institutional environment, allocation of public goods among stakeholders, and overall organization and coordination.

Contents

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1. Introduction

In China, conflicts between construction land demand and farmland protection have become more pronounced as a result of continuous economic growth accompanied by equally rapid growth in urbanization—spatially as well as in population numbers (Long, 2006; Lichtenberg and Ding, 2009). There are two types of construction land demand in China. One type involves construction land for urbanization and industrialization. Rapid growth of GDP, income, and urbanization have prompted a dramatic expansion of the urban construction land base (Han, 2010). Burgeoning industrialization and associated economic growth have drawn enormous numbers of migrants from rural areas to the cities, resulting in steep population declines in many rural areas. Population decline typically will lead to residential land base shrinkage; in China's case, however, rural population decline has been accompanied by an expansion of the rural residential land base (Long et al., 2012). The other type of construction land demand involves rural residential use. This kind of demand can be explained by farmers' wishes to improve their living standards. Farmers may build larger houses on original residential land or simply abandon existing dwellings and construct new ones on other sites (Long et al., 2007).

Rapid expansion of the rural construction land base has led to pressure for stepped-up farmland protection efforts. The central government has responded by introducing a number of measures in recent years (Lichtenberg and Ding, 2009). In 2006, the government introduced a strict farmland protection objective, with the aim of maintaining total farmland area at no less than 1.8 billion mu (120 million ha) in the period extending to 2020 (Long et al., 2012). However, according to official government statistics, China lost over 460.2 million mu (30.68 million ha) of arable land from 2006 through 2007. There were only 1.827 billion mu (121.7 million ha) of farmland left in 2007,[1] thus the target left little room for further loss of farmland before the next round of land use planning (2008–2020) commenced. In order to fulfill the objective of keeping no fewer than 1.8 billion mu farmland to 2020, the central government introduced the 'Integrated Consolidation and Allocation of Rural–urban Construction Land (ICARUCL)' policy, which continued a series of trial projects that were undertaken in selected provinces in 2005 and issued a new general management policy in 2008.[2]

The 2008 ICARUCL policy differs from earlier construction land control policies, which usually focused only on urban construction land rather than addressing both urban and rural construction land expansion. Even though pressure for farmland conversion has been primarily from urban expansion (Wang and Scott, 2008; Yu and Ng, 2007), rural residential land expansion also is a significant, and growing, factor (Huang et al., 2011). Therefore, an integrated policy directed toward managing rural as well as urban construction land should be more optimal than prior policies in reducing conflicts between rural–urban construction land expansion and farmland protection. ICARUCL is just this kind of policy. The key objective of the ICARUCL policy is to achieve equilibrium in the supply of land by balancing increases in urban construction land (driven by urbanization) with decreases in rural construction land (facilitated by out-migration) (Long et al., 2012). It seeks to achieve balanced development between urban construction land and rural construction land. Since rural residential land expansion is accompanied by rural population decreases, we could characterize this kind of rural construction land expansion as "rural residential land sprawl". ICARUCL controls this kind of sprawl through rural residential land consolidation. Former rural construction land can be reclaimed as agricultural land to support food security or can be converted into urban construction land directly to serve urban development needs. Following residential land consolidation, farmers living on those residential lands will be resettled into newly constructed central villages. With the implementation of ICARUCL, not only can construction land expansion be controlled, but patterns of sprawled development on rural construction land can be reduced and rural living environments may also receive some improvement (Liu and Hao, 2011).

The ICARUCL policy is an instrument used by government to provide construction land for economic growth as well as to protect farmland (Tang et al., 2012). A central thrust of this policy is to meet demand for urban construction land through rural residential land consolidation. China's land use planning system permits each administrative region to expand its construction land base to a defined extent. In other words, each administrative region is assigned a construction land expansion quota that extends over a defined planning period. Since the central government's land use planning system controls only the total amount of construction land, there is the potential for expanding the urban construction land base, without occupying additional farmland, to the extent that the rural residential land base is reduced in size.

Previous studies concerning ICARUCL policy have focused principally on its application, including such aspects as calculation of the extent to which urban construction land quotas can be transferred from rural construction lands in specific study areas (Yao and Zheng, 2006), evaluation of the consolidation potential of rural construction land in the study area (Xu et al., 2009), and classification of the targets of ICARUCL policy (Wang et al., 2011). Those studies helped lay a strong theoretical foundation for ICARUCL policy. But beyond the development of theory, more systematic studies of policy implementation are needed. ICARUCL policy implementation involves spatial-territorial, administrative, and industrial reorganization (Liu et al., 2009). As the ICARUCL policy is implemented, the current benefits distribution mechanism of rural–urban construction system is altered, giving rise to various new challenges. Recent debates focusing on ICARUCL have been marked by an increased awareness of these problems and of the conflicts created by this policy. Among the issues addressed are the factors that hinder policy implementation (Hu, 2009), as well as ways in which the policy may be implemented more smoothly (Chen et al., 2011).

The ICARUCL policy is, in essence, a top-down rural development strategy based on government intervention. It has encountered resistance when sufficient time has not been devoted to involving local actors (Long et al., 2012). Currently, the central government plays an important part in determining the overall success of this policy. Indeed, government's roles in solving the

[1] http://www.mlr.gov.cn/zt/17thtudiri/4.htm.

[2] Urban construction land in this research includes municipal land, industrial land, and transportation land; rural construction land means refers to residential land.