

# Tibet: A Human Development and Environment Report

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report reviews the past, not to attribute blame but to understand how the present situation came to be, and how best to act in the future. To focus on well-being we must focus on the present, and on remedies, rather than dwelling on the past or seeking to assign blame. This report aims to look ahead, in a positive way, to new policy directions, which can often be found by adopting global best practice. China's actions in Tibet lag well behind the modern, advanced standards of human development in many ways. The emphasis has been on imposing large-scale, hard infrastructure from above, neglecting the "soft infrastructure" of human education, training, participation and engagement, especially of the rural Tibetans who are native to the great grasslands that surround the privileged new immigrant cities of Tibet.

This report identifies and documents several of the dangers facing Tibet and the Tibetan people today, many of which have only emerged recently and have not been reported before. Over the past 50 years, many long-standing, worsening and chronic problems have been caused by the excessive emphasis on making the plateau produce more for human consumption than is sustainable. Today, Tibet and the Tibetan people face many serious challenges, which are described chapter-by-chapter in this report. A summary of the chapters is provided below:

### NOMADS AND GRASSLANDS

Pastoral nomadism has historically been the primary and most suitable land use for the conditions on the Tibetan Plateau. This traditional, mobile, extensive approach is now being threatened in innumerable ways; the exclusion of nomads from areas designated for industrial extraction and processing; the policy of settling nomads and fencing their pastures; intensive irrigation that captures the best water supplies, which the nomads formerly relied on; shutting nomads out of designated conservation zones; and failing to invest in the re-sowing of native grasses in areas of degradation. Grassland policy went from one extreme of coercive collectivisation, which reduced all nomads to labourers, to the opposite extreme of reducing the unit of animal production to the level of individual households. Only in a few cases have Tibetans

managed to retain their traditional community-based grassland organisations, which group many families together and mean that there is no need for expensive fencing. The degradation of grassland is a serious problem that threatens the productivity of livestock. The causes of grassland degradation may be disputed, but the evidence of degradation is undeniable. The nomads themselves are sometimes blamed for the degradation, and accused of being ignorant of their own pastures. These occurrences of grassland degradation, erosion, rigid land lease allocation, exclusion of nomads, inadequate education, and concentration of services in urban areas all conspire to undermine the pastoral nomadic way of life.

### EDUCATION

Education plays a fundamental role in the economic well-being of society, and forms the basis of all genuine development. Before the Chinese invasion in 1950, monasteries were the major learning centres in Tibet, and fulfilled Tibet's unique educational needs. Secular education in government-funded and private schools also gained some ground in the first half of the 20th century. It is true that the Tibetans were developing a secular education system before the Chinese invasion. However, China's invasion put a sudden stop to all indigenous development of an education system in Tibet. Today, illiteracy levels in Tibet are as high as the poorest countries found at the bottom of the UN Development Programme's (UNDP) Human Development Index rankings. The average adult Tibetan has only had three years of primary schooling and almost half of all Tibetans are illiterate. Official Chinese data from the 2000 census showed that the overall illiteracy rate among Tibetans aged 15 years and over was 48 per cent, or 60 per cent for women. According to the UNDP, education provision in the "Tibet Autonomous Region" ("TAR") is the worst of all 31 Chinese provinces. It estimates that 55 per cent of the Tibetan population of the "TAR" is illiterate, while the other 30 provinces all have illiteracy rates below 20 per cent. A similar survey conducted by National Research Center for Science and Technology for Development and Fafo Institute of Applied International Studies revealed that 59 per cent of the Tibetans who live in regions outside

of the “TAR” cannot read or write in any language, and that 40 per cent do not have easy access to a primary school.

## **UNEMPLOYMENT AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION**

Low levels of literacy lead to low levels of employment, and there are very few opportunities for the Tibetan people to enter modern economic sectors. This is especially true of the booming urban areas, since the Chinese immigrants, even those from poor provinces, are invariably better educated. The result is chronic unemployment and underemployment for the Tibetans. Tibetans who live in the cities are largely restricted to unskilled construction labour, and those who are allowed to stay on their rural land have little opportunity to earn local, off-farm income. Employment is one of the primary determinants of the economic development and well-being of Tibetans. The absence of employment and income-earning potential – particularly in rural areas – is acute. In China, despite the economic boom, there has been a sharp rise in unemployment. The official urban unemployment rate in China has been set as low as 4.2 per cent. But independent researchers assert that, in any given year, the actual Chinese unemployment rate is likely to be at least double the official figure. The Chinese State Council’s own Development Research Centre has warned that urban unemployment stands at 10 per cent and could soon rise to 15 per cent, which strongly contradicts the current official figure of 4.5 per cent. According to the 2006 International Labour Organisation (ILO) report, China’s economy grew by a stunning 50 per cent between 2000 and 2004, yet there was only a five per cent rise in the number of jobs available. Compared to its rate of GDP growth, the number of jobs being created in China has slowed down tremendously. In Tibet also there has been dramatic economic growth without the corresponding creation of new jobs. This lack of employment opportunities is pushing the Tibetan people further into the margins of economic activity.

## **URBANISATION AND INEQUALITY**

Throughout its provinces, China sees urbanisation as a self-evident good, the epitome of productivist progress, and even a law of history. Even though rapid urbanisation swallows China’s precious arable land, intensifies energy use and increases all forms of pollution, China presents this accelerated urbanisation as proof of progress and an improvement in local living standards. Urbanisation is China’s master strategy for modernising Tibet. It underlies

the desire to transfer large immigrant populations into Tibet and implement innumerable policies; to exploit Tibet’s minerals and energy resources; to integrate Tibet’s roads, railways and rivers into China’s transport and electricity grids; to secure China’s borders; to suppress Tibetan aspirations for freedom; and to introduce mass tourism for the employment of immigrant labour. Urbanisation is the key to China’s entire spectrum of development in Tibet. Prior to the Chinese invasion, the central town of Lhasa covered an area of only three square kilometres and had no more than 30,000 permanent residents. Today, Lhasa covers 53 sq km, and there are plans to expand this urban area to 272 sq km by 2015. The new cities in Tibet are unsustainable islands of privilege and extreme inequality, surrounded by the rural poor. Massive external funding continues to subsidise this urban lifestyle, and salaries can even exceed those of Beijing in an attempt to entice a favoured, largely immigrant elite. Investment, infrastructure, services and comforts are all concentrated in these small, privileged, heavily subsidised enclaves, and in the transport corridors that connect them to inland China; meanwhile, the countryside is in a state of neglect. The Tibetan Plateau is suited to extensive, not intensive, land use. The culture of Tibet, based on household economies, is accustomed to wealth redistribution, not constant accumulation. The new extremes of wealth and poverty, of urban luxury and rural deprivation, are both alarming and worsening.

## **DAMMING TIBETAN WATERS**

China is building an extraordinary number of hydropower dams on the Tibetan rivers that feed almost all of Asia, and is therefore depriving downstream users of a regular flow. The purpose is not to provide electricity to rural Tibet, but to supply the smelters, heavy industries and distant cities of the plains below. China may soon commit to damming all of Tibet’s major rivers in a single water capture scheme, on a scale that would dwarf the Three Gorges project, in an audacious attempt to divert water to the North China Plain via the Machu (Yellow River). This would seriously decrease the water supplies of India, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Laos and Burma, as well as the Yangtze river basin as far as Shanghai, especially in drought years. Meanwhile, rural Tibetans continue to suffer high rates of hepatitis, water-borne infections and back pain because they are forced to fetch water from far down the valley due to inadequate village water supplies, even though fulfilling this requirement would cost only a tiny fraction of the amount spent on these massive dams.

## NATURAL RESOURCE EXTRACTION

The industrialisation of Tibet, based on a productivist agenda that has persisted for over 50 years, has largely failed. Decades of destructive logging of Tibetan forests is coming to an end only because the resources have been exhausted. Reforestation efforts have been mostly limited to ineffective aerial seed drops. China's expectations that Tibet can be remotely managed, and made to increase production, have not yet been met. They have been hampered by the obstacles of remoteness, lack of transport infrastructure, and China's insistence that Tibet face east, rather than south – its historic economic linkage with India. For 50 years, China has sought a “pillar industry” that would generate wealth creation and an economic take-off. To date, this ambition has not yet been realised. Although the extraction of natural resources, especially timber and minerals, has been widespread and environmentally destructive, the mining industry has so far been small-scale. However, this is all about to change now that Tibet is connected to China's railway network, which will enable large scale extraction to accelerate and lead to detrimental impacts on the Tibetan Plateau that will have a global reach.

## TOURISM AND TIBETAN CULTURE

The number of Chinese tourists in central Tibet, labelled by China as the “Tibet Autonomous Region” (“TAR”), and to other areas of Tibet, continues to rise rapidly. With a booming tourism industry and rapid infrastructure development, the “roof of the world” is fast becoming a must-visit destination for people from all over the world. Tourism may quickly become the “pillar industry” that China has long sought, and generate economic growth capable of employing large numbers of non-Tibetan immigrants. Mass package tourism, as practiced by millions of visitors to Tibet, is no doubt taking a severe toll on the plateau. The pollution and “environmental externalities” caused by the current tourism industry have actually reduced the natural beauty of the areas that are intrinsic to the industry itself. In 2006, some 2.45 million tourists visited Tibet, which was a 36.1 per cent increase on the previous year. Revenue from tourism was approximately 2.7 billion yuan (US \$338 mn), an increase of 39.5 per cent on the previous year, and accounted for 9.3 per cent of the total GDP of the “TAR”. To accommodate this explosive growth, the authorities have decided to expand the local tourism industry even further and are anticipating 4 million tourist visits in 2007, aided by cheap rail and air fares. Lhasa

currently has 300,000 residents, of whom at most 100,000 are Tibetans, and such a drastic increase in tourism will surely overwhelm this destination, which is considered to be a place of spiritual power, mental purification and transformation to the Tibetans.

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND THE POPULATION FOOTPRINT

Unskilful interventions by the developmentalist, productivist central authorities have amounted to a great deal of unsustainable development in Tibet. All of the chapters of this report highlight one common theme: the exclusion of Tibetans from any effective role in deciding their own future. The Tibetan people have been unable to participate meaningfully in any of the decision-making that has shaped their land and livelihoods. The school curriculum has no connection with the realities of their daily life. This stands in stark contrast to the rural development practices of other poor countries around the world. China, so advanced in so many fields, has fallen far behind in its methods of participatory development practice. Many past mistakes can avoid being repeated if the Tibetans are treated as equal partners, their knowledge heard and their basic human needs respected in all future development plans. What has been missing all along from China's actions in Tibet is the inclusion of ordinary Tibetans, the acknowledgement of their accumulated knowledge of the land and its limits, and their skill in caring for the wildlife and conservation of this vast plateau the size of Western Europe. A series of brief case studies of sustainable development in practice, both in Tibet and in countries facing similar problems, are also discussed. These case studies show that, in contrast to the ineffective, statist, top-down approaches of the past, much can be achieved through careful planning and an attitude of inclusiveness. Throughout this report, we discover evidence of the heavy human footprint of the current population in Tibet. The human population of the plateau, according to China's official census figures, is at least 10 million people (excluding huge population of Chinese military), which is 70 per cent above what the area has sustained historically. That dramatic increase is maintained by massive subsidies and external inputs that are unsustainable in the long term. Large-scale projects are imposed from above with no engagement of ordinary Tibetans in their design or implementation. Tibetan knowledge of the land and sustainable modes of production are systematically swept aside. Beijing has insisted on making the land yield more, disrespecting the natural constraints that are unique to this high, cold and

largely dry plateau. For over 50 years, China's interventions in Tibet, despite many changes, have consistently been centred on productivism from the perspective of a developmentalist state. In other cold and dry areas of the world, productivism has reached its limits and is now beginning to withdraw. How long will it be before this happens to Tibet?

Finally, this report concludes with the *Guidelines for International Development Projects and Sustainable Development in Tibet*\*, which are addressed to all parties who wish to

undertake projects in Tibet – China's central leaders, international advisers, development agencies and investors – in order to provide clear principles and practices for human development that are best suited to Tibet and its people. ■

\* *Guidelines for International Development Projects and Sustainable Development in Tibet* is available online at [www.tibet.net/en/diir/enviro/guide/](http://www.tibet.net/en/diir/enviro/guide/)

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