

# State Simplification and Access Issues for Farming Land in Upland Communities in a Chinese Village

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## Abstract

*This paper reports the findings of an investigation into how government land policies and in particular the Sloping Land Conversion Program (SLCP) has affected farmers' access to farming land and how local people have responded to these policies. Access to land is unequal in most rural areas in China. Access is controlled by state land policies and local power relations. On the macro-level, the state initiates generalised (simplified) land policies; but it is often difficult to implement these policies in the widely varying conditions at the local level. The diversity of livelihoods in villages results in differing responses to the state's land policies, particularly SLCP. The state's generalised policies cause many conflicts about access to land.*

## The Sloping Land Conversion Program

Ribot and Peluso (2003) define access as “the ability to derive benefits from things”. This paper discusses how access to the natural resources of land, water and forests is influencing the livelihoods of local people in one Chinese village.

Access to land is a controversial issue in many societies. As a major means of production, land is perceived as central to development in developing countries. It is often farmers' main capital and governs their livelihood strategies and so is a key determinant of human welfare (Scoones 1998). Any government that sincerely pursues development must institute viable land programmes and policies. The Chinese government has put land and its attendant issues at the centre of its development strategies. In fact, the beginning of the current great rise of the Chinese economy can be traced back to individual farmers being given access to farmlands under the Household Responsibility System in 1978.

In the past few decades, the Chinese Government has implemented new land policies. From the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 to the present, many policies on land tenure and land use have been formulated (Selden 1993). Land reform measures introduced in the early 1950s provided poor people with access to farmland. From the mid-1950s the state pushed the ‘collectivisation’ of land. This aimed for equitable access to natural resources and mutual support for labour sharing and decision-making. During the collectivisation era (1950-1978), all farmlands and forestlands were nationalised, and the state was responsible for drafting land policies, land use planning, and decision-making about resource management. Private and customary ownership and access rights to forestlands were not legally recognised or respected. This changed after economic reforms in the agricultural

sector in 1978 and in the forest sector in 1982. This securing of people's access to land and forest resources has contributed to increased food production and has enhanced the living standard of rural people.

China's rapid economic growth has, however, led to high levels of air and water pollution, a drastic loss of biodiversity and vegetation cover, and alarming rates of deforestation and soil erosion (Chai 2000).

The Chinese government began to pay more attention to environmental issues after the destructive Yangtze River flood of 1998. This disastrous event was blamed on the clearance of large areas of upland forests. The government responded by first introducing the Natural Forest Protection Program to ban logging. The logging of natural forests was banned in upstream parts of the Yangtze and Yellow rivers, including parts of Yunnan Province (China Daily 2000). Soon after, the Sloping Land Conversion Program (SLCP) was introduced. This SLCP (Tuigeng Huanlin Huancao in Chinese) aimed to persuade farmers to convert upland fields into forests or grasslands. Agricultural fields with a slope of more than 25 degrees were singled out for farmers to plant. A survey by the Ministry of Land and Resources, the National Bureau of Statistics, and the National Agricultural Census Office found that 28.4% of the total area of West China (including Yunnan Province) was cultivated land, with 76.5% of this having a more than 25 degrees slope (Beijing Review 2000). The aim was to reduce the erosion caused by the cultivation of steeply sloping land.

Recognising that farmers would sustain substantial losses in forgoing grain cultivation, the central government provided a compensation package (see details below) that it pledged to provide for up to eight years or longer if necessary.

The SLCP has been a large-scale complex undertaking and has encountered a number of problems. It has led to conflicts emerging, in particular between environmental conservation and people's livelihoods. The new policies have had a large impact on farmers. Almost 94 percent of Yunnan Province is covered in mountains with almost all cropland is on slopes of more than 25 degrees. This has made wholesale conversion very difficult. Farmers in these areas are getting adequate compensation for giving up cropping their sloping farmland.

There are three ways of looking at farmers' access to land:

- the simplified state view as embodied in its land policies;
- the expanded view of the local political authority; and
- the elaborate view of the villagers that see all the complex social, political, and economic aspects that relate to land.

James Scott's exploration of the concept of state simplification (1998) discusses how governments, to deal with the varied natural and social environments that they govern, attempt to make these environments legible or understandable. They achieve this by creating simplifications or generalisations to form the basis of broad policies and actions. The problem is that these simplifications often do not apply well in particular circumstances and so frequently lead to conflicts. Scott claims that

*the necessarily simple abstractions of large bureaucratic institutions can never adequately represent the actual complexity of natural or social process... The simple 'production and profit' model of agricultural extension and agricultural research has failed in important ways to represent the complex, subtle, and negotiated objectives of real farmers and their communities (1998: 262).*

## Study Methods

A qualitative research case study was carried out on Yangjia Village, Banqian, Baoshan Prefecture, Yunnan Province, southwest China to see the impact of the state's land policies. The main source of information came from interviewing local respondents. In-depth interviews were carried out with 13 key-informant farmers. These farmers were selected for their relevant knowledge and their willingness to share their knowledge. Other key informants included local government officials, extension workers, local teachers, and community leaders. They provided information on the changes that have occurred in the community, the processes involved in the implementation of state land policies, emerging land tenure and land use issues, and local people's responses to the policies.

## Community Profile

Yangjia village lies in the middle stream of Xizhuanghe watershed five kilometres from the Dabao national highway, and 18 kilometres from Baoshan city. Shaba town with its post office and hospital is the nearest service centre. The office for Qingshui administrative village lies in the neighbouring Guangwanken village.

The village is in a very mountainous area with the intensive farming of corn during the summer and wheat during the winter. The climate is strongly influenced by the monsoon with wet and dry seasons. Geologically, most of the area is covered with limestone and a little sandstone. The upper land of the village is mostly forested, with the village settlement in the middle areas, farmland in the middle-lower areas, and degraded land on low elevations.

There are 55 households and a total population of 236 people all of whom are Han Chinese. The nearest clinic is in the neighbouring village of Guangwankeng staffed by a paramedic. There are two primary schools close by. Many local people are illiterate and only a few children graduate beyond primary level due to the high expense of higher education. Many local men work away and older people and women take the major responsibility for farming during winter time.

The main food crops are maize, wheat, soyabean, and rice. Rice cultivation is becoming rarer because of the lack of locally preferred varieties. The main cash crops are tea, tobacco and fruits. Livestock is an important source of income for some households with pig, horse, goat, sheep and chickens. Persimmons, apples, pears, walnuts, plums and peaches are grown.

The area has only 9 ha of rainfed farm land. The most productive and intensively managed crops are corn, which gives a yield of 4.5 tonnes per ha, and wheat which gives 3 tonnes per ha. The 8 ha of tea gardens provide a crucial source of income. This area is well known for its good quality tea.

## Policy, Local Livelihoods and Access to Land

The main objective of the government's SLCP is to reduce erosion by converting private cropland on steep slopes and some degraded land to grassland and forest. Farmers are given grain, cash, and tree saplings as incentives. Official statistics reported that there was 6 million ha of cropland with a slope of more than 25 degrees in China at the time that SLCP was started. More than 70 percent of these areas were in the western region of China (Beijing Review 2000: 26).

SLCP was designed by the central government and is being implemented by local officials. The provinces are responsible for assigning programme tasks to lower levels of government. The provinces in turn assign tasks to lower-level local government. It is mostly county forestry departments in cooperation with township governments that conduct field surveys and assign tasks to be carried out by households. They develop grassroots implementation plans which are then presented to the state forest administration (SFA) for approval.

The main state policies for the implementation of SLCP are to:

- grant free grain to farmers who convert their cropland, amounting to 150 kg of grain per mu (2.25 tonnes per ha) of land per year in the upper reaches of the Yangtze River, and 100 kg in the upper reaches of the Yellow River for 5-8 years;
- grant cash subsidies to farmers who convert their cropland (US\$2.40/mu or US\$36/ha per year);
- provide tree and grass seedlings to farmers that convert their cropland;
- contract individual farmers to carry out the land use conversion;
- make farmers responsible for growing trees and grass on the converted cropland and also on 1 mu (0.067 ha) or more of barren hills and degraded lands that is suitable for afforestation; and
- make the forestry agencies responsible for checking the implementation of cropland conversion in terms of schedule, quality, and management and for approving compensation payments (SFA 2000).

The Department of Forestry is the main local actor for environmental protection. For SLCP the department has to cooperate with the government agencies responsible for allocating grain and cash payments and giving new land tenure certificate. Table 17.1 shows how the implementation of SLCP demands good cooperation between different agencies. A delay in one agency can hold up the whole programme. A major problem has been the Department of Forestry's lack of human and financial resources to administer the programme. Another problem has been the selection of land for conversion. It has proven impractical to ask farmers to convert all of their steeply sloping cultivated land. The strategy of the local Baoshan government has been to ask local village cadre to submit their proposals for sloping land conversion specifying that conversion should only take place on adjacent plots that together make up at least 3.3 ha to ease measurement and checking.

Table 17.1: Agency responsibilities for SLCP	
Unit	Responsibility
Commission of Planning	Overall planning and compiling
Commission of Minority and Nationality Affairs	Ethnic affairs
Department of Finance	Overall budgeting, releasing compensation payments, reducing or exempting liability for agricultural taxation
Department of Agriculture	Releasing crop compensation
Department of Land and Resources	Policies on improving land tenure systems, releasing new land contracts to farmers during SLCP, and issuing cropland conversion task cards for upland conversion
Department of Forestry	Overall activity planning and implementation: selecting land to convert, measuring areas, providing seedlings, monitoring conversion upland, issuing certificates, etc.

## Local Farmers' Responses

Based on the policy of not converting single areas of less than 3.3 ha, the land belonging to only 26 of Yangjia's 55 households have been included in SLCP. The response of local people has been in-line with their level of reliance on the land for their livelihoods. Households that only partly rely on it, or who have abandoned it, have quite willingly participated whereas those that rely on their land for most of their livelihoods, such as tea plantation owners, have strongly resisted. The land assigned for conversion in the Da-jia-yan area of Yangjia village, is cultivated by some households and abandoned by others. The local conservation plan had been submitted to the local government. The approval of conversion depends on how much quota of SLCP has been allocated from central government to local government.

The growing of grain in this area no longer makes economic sense as much cheaper imported grain is available. So, grain crops are no longer the first choice for planting and it is more profitable to grow tea, fruit, and upland vegetables. In most peasant households in Yangjia village, land degradation has led to the need to apply more fertiliser for growing crops. This makes them expensive to grow. Without fertilisers, decreasing productivity means that corn and wheat crops will only provide seven to eight months' worth of food. Almost 70% of households in Yangjia need to buy rice to supplement their own production. The main ways for these people to improve their standard of living is through off-farm working and by selling livestock, tea, fruits, and other crops.

Eleven of the 26 households taking part in SLCP in Yangjia Village are Group A households. These rely on their cultivated land for their livelihoods. They have smaller land holdings and significant surplus labour. Their main crops are corn, wheat and in some cases, tea. The growing of tea demands much work between March and October. When the market price of tea leaves is US\$0.72-0.96 per kg, the income amounts to US\$36-48/mu (US\$540-720/ha).

Group A people tend to have sufficient available labour to grow tea in contrast to the other three groups. Tea brings good economic benefits, but is labour-intensive. Another characteristic of this group is the importance of livestock raising. They grow corn to provide much of their livestock feed. These farmers have the most productive sloping lands and most strongly oppose SLCP (Table 17.2).

Group B (4 out of 26 households) also put much effort into farming. However, due to their lack of labour they cannot grow tea and corn and instead grow soyabean as it needs less labour. It also needs only a small amount of fertiliser and can easily be exchanged for rice. A kilogram of soyabean is exchanged for 1 kg of rice, while 2 kg of corn is needed to get 1 kg of rice. The SLCP is threatening these people's livelihoods by preventing them from growing this crop.

Table 17.2: Yangjia village household types and their responses to SLCP during planning stage

Group type (no. of hh)	Land status	Livelihood strategy	Response to SLCP
Group A (11)	Cultivated land	Tea plantation, corn plantation and livestock	Strongly resisting
Group B (4)	Cultivated land	Soyabean and corn plantation	Resisting
Group C (7)	Abandoned land	Full-time off-farm work	Hesitating
Group D (4)	Abandoned land	Part-time off-farm work	Willingly participating

The Group C households (7 out of 26 households) have surplus labour. These households differ from Group A in that they have abandoned cultivation to engage in off-farm work. Many have family members with skills such as carpentry, plastering, and blacksmithing. Some have outside contacts that allow them to find construction work outside the village. Most households want to move away from farming to work in urban areas. However, Group C hesitates to take part in SLCP because they suspect the government will not keep its promises.

The Group D households (4 out of 26) find it most difficult to sustain their livelihoods. They have only limited labour to either produce more from their own land or to pursue off-farm work. Their food security is often threatened by low production from their land and the lack of cash incomes from off-farm work. The SLCP provides them with a valuable source of income from their abandoned lands and so they are eager to participate.

The amount of available labour and the types of crops are the key factors that govern farmers' livelihood strategies. This study worked out the impact and economic contrasts of different crops grown in the study area (Tables 17.3 and 17.4). The factors delineated in these tables account for most of the factors that farmers take into account when deciding which crops to grow. The study found that farmers see corn as a very useful crop but growing it is environmentally damaging compared to soyabean. The most profitable crop is tea (Table 17.4).

## Impact of SLCP

The township government's decision to implement SLCP in Yangjia village has had a huge impact on this quiet upland village. Unlike other state land policies, the SLCP relies on the willingness of farmers to participate and local officials cannot force farmers to convert their sloping land. The programme is only at the planning stage and this research reports on local people's responses to the proposed programme.

Table 17.3: Farmers' perceptions of impacts of crops in Yangjia village			
Crops	Social benefit	Economic benefit	Ecological impact
Maize	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Main crop, especially for fodder. Demands higher labour and time inputs	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The value of production almost equals the capital input. 2 kg corn can be exchanged for only 1 kg of rice. But corn is valued as livestock feed.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Farmers use more chemical fertiliser and less manure to improve the poor soil fertility as fields are far from the village
Tea	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Main cash crop. But higher labour and time input, especially for women	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Important source of cash	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Farmers use chemical fertilisers and pesticide, one type of which is forbidden in food production
Soyabean	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Not a main crop but has lower labour and time inputs, and is simple to grow	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Lower capital inputs and higher productivity than corn. 1 kg soyabean can be exchanged for 1 kg rice	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Nitrogen fixation increases soil fertility and improves soil structure



**Table 17.4: Yangjia village farmers' estimates of economics of crop growing**

Crop	Labour input	Capital input	Average productivity (kg/mu)	Market price (yuan/kg)	Income yuan/mu
<b>Soyabean</b>	Medium (simple management)	Low (average less than US\$4.80/mu, including seeds)	120	2.40	288
<b>Corn</b>	High (fertilising, weeding, etc.)	High (average US\$8.40/mu)	100	0.76	76
<b>Tea</b>	High (applying pesticide, harvesting leaves)	High (average more than US\$12/mu)	50	8	400

This study identified four types of responses to the conversion programme with Group D households being most likely to take part in conversion. This group appreciates the benefits from the little work of planting trees for the return of regular cash and grain payments from the government over five to eight years and beyond. Farmers in Group D feel optimistic about SCLP as they lack the internal and external livelihood opportunities compared to the other groups. One of them said that it is not possible to get that amount of grain from a whole year of working hard on the land. "Now we can get some cash and grain for doing nothing in the following years, so why not join the scheme?" Group D farmers benefit from planting up land that they no longer grow crops on. They have been encouraging other farmers to take part.

Similarly, the people in Group C have good reason to take part in SLCP as they are quite well off as they already have enough income from on-farm work. However, one farmer pointed out, 'If we provide free labour to plant trees for the government and lowland people in our own farming land, I might as well leave it abandoned'. He added that if he did this at least he would still be able to crop it, plant trees, or do anything else he wanted later. Bad experiences with other government programmes mean that these people are suspicious that they will not receive due compensation on time. This makes them hesitate to take part in SLCP. They always keep silent in SLCP planning meetings waiting to see others' responses.

Group B people resist SLCP and are not persuaded by the prospect of five to eight years of compensation payments. Having to use their 'useless' land for environment conservation for sustainable livelihood by certain officials enrages many of these farmers. A Group B farmer said, "We know how to produce enough food from our land. How can we agree to only get some grain for 5 to 8 years instead of for a life long period?" Many of these farmers have started planting soyabeans on their degraded land to improve soil fertility and get better returns.

These farmers, who have decades long experience of making a living from the land, have a better vision and plan for the future of their land. The study investigated how Group B farmers have experimented with growing improved varieties of corn and soyabeans (Table 17.5).

The farmers in Group B know in detail about the economics of crop growing. The average rice consumption per person per year is 350 kg in Yangjia Village. Planting corn in Yangjia,

Table 17.5: Returns on corn and soyabean grown by group B farmers, Yangjia village			
Crops	Productivity on fertile land	Productivity on less fertile land	Equal value with rice
Old corn varieties	300 kg/mu	100 kg/mu	50 kg/mu
High yielding corn varieties	525 kg/mu	-	50 kg/mu
Soyabean	-	120 kg/mu	120 kg/mu
Note: The high yielding varieties of corn did not grow well on the less-fertile land, and soyabean isn't fit for fertile land which causes disease and pest infestations			

where there are 9 ha of fertile lands and 27 ha of less-fertile lands produces 40,250 kg of corn which was exchanged for 20,125 kg of rice. However, this is not enough to meet local needs. Planting a combination of the new variety of corn on the fertile lands and soyabean on the less-fertile lands realises 83,437 kg of rice. This can meet the needs of the whole community. It seems that a combination of the new variety of more productive corn on the fertile lands and soyabean on the less-fertile land would meet local food needs. The village head belongs to group B and often asks SLCP officials whether they will still get compensation from the local government for food security issue after SLCP comes to an end after eight years. The people in group B don't want to take part in SLCP.

People in Group A strongly oppose SLCP. It will only give 150 kg of grain, US\$2.40 for education, and US\$6 for tree seedlings. The value of this compensation amounts to about US\$24 per mu per year. This is less than the US\$48 per mu profit they earn from managing their tea gardens. A farmer in Group A admitted that they had to work hard to earn that money, 'but at least it is under our control. We are not fools to give up US\$48 to receive only US\$24 in return'. Their productive land provides cash income from the tea gardens and agricultural products to feed their livestock. They will lose out if they join SLCP and strongly oppose joining it. They have asked the village head to make their position clear to SLCP officials and not to betray them under political pressure from high-level government officials.

The different priorities of local people with most villagers not in favour of taking part in SLCP, means that it was planned to postpone its implementation from 2001 to 2003.

## Conclusions

State simplification is the strategy adopted by governments to initiate broad policies and actions often at the cost of local diversity and complexity. As a result it often leads to conflicts. This study has shown how SLCP does not account for the diversity of local conditions and the needs of different community people. SLCP gives little attention to local social dimensions. The people of Yangjia village have different household sizes, family composition, and socioeconomic status. The willingness to convert agricultural land is based on local people's differing livelihood strategies. SLCP ignores this diversity and proposes a single approach with one compensation standard. It shows how state policymakers are insensitive to rural communities social structures and processes. Of the four broad socioeconomic groups in this village only one welcomes SLCP.

Local officials and village cadre understand farmers' opinions about SLCP. They are in a dilemma whether to try and change state policies or to initiate new local regulations to make state policies more amenable. They are often able to predict the prospects of state policies introduced into their areas.



## Future Implications

Centralised unilateral development approaches have often failed because they ignore local communities' interests. In China this has increased the problems faced by many upland communities. State policies need to account for local people's approaches to sustaining their livelihoods. A livelihood is sustainable only when it can cope with and recover from stresses and maintain and enhance its capabilities and assets while not undermining local natural resources (Scoones 1998). All these aspects need to be considered when drafting policies. Farmers have communicated their objections to SLCP to local officials. This should make the government more aware of farmers' priorities and be seen positively as a chance to adapt policy to better address farmers' priorities.

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