



NOMAD RESETTLEMENT



“Nomads remain beyond the reach of the state. Their economic self-sufficiency, mobility and traditional and religious outlook on life make them the most difficult people to integrate into the Chinese state.”

– A Tibetan former nomad



Tibetan nomads are forced to resettle in concrete blocks

Tibet’s nomadic lifestyle is one of the last examples in the world of sustainable pastoralism. For centuries, Tibetan nomadic herders have made a sustainable living uniquely adapted to the harsh conditions of the Tibetan plateau.

However, since the beginning of the Western Development Strategy in 1999-2000, the Chinese government has been implementing policies of settlement, land confiscation, and fencing of pastoral

areas inhabited primarily by Tibetans, dramatically curtailing their livelihood. Hundreds of thousands of Tibetan nomads have been required to slaughter their livestock and move into newly built housing colonies in or near towns, abandoning their traditional way of life.

The campaign, officially aimed at “*eliminating regional disparities gradually, strengthening the unity of ethnic groups, ensuring safety and social stability and promoting progress,*” was a watershed in the



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state's attempt to integrate ethnic minority area.¹ It combined major infrastructure investments, especially in transportation and energy; a massive increase in exploitation of natural resources; renewed efforts to draw foreign and domestic investment; and closer integration with developed areas in the eastern part of China.

As highlighted by the former UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food De Schutter, it is difficult to assess the precise number of resettled herders and rural residents: “(...) both because local authorities are encouraged to overestimate their achievements compared to official targets, and because a number of resettled herders move back to their pastures after recognizing the impossibility of sustaining a decent livelihood in resettlement camps, while others migrate to cities in the hope of finding better livelihood opportunities. However, it was reported in 2010 that between 50 and 80 per cent of the 2.25 million nomads on the Tibetan plateau were being progressively relocated”.²

The Chinese State-run media CCTV reported on September 13, 2012 that: “According to the statistics, over one million Tibetan herders have bid farewell to their centuries-old nomadic lifestyle and settled down in towns and cities during the past few years (...). Tibet plans to invest 400 million yuan more in nomad's settlement of 13.4 thousands households in the approaching five years during the ‘Twelfth Five-Year’ plan period of China”.³

In its 2012 report, the CECC (Congressional Executive Commission on China) points out: “State-run media reported in January 2012 that 1.85 million herdsmen had been settled in the TAR by 2011. An August 2011 central government opinion on ‘development’ of pastoral areas called for settlement of all herders nationwide and provision of public services to them to be ‘basically’ accomplished by 2015 and ‘fully improved’ by 2020”.⁴

The implementation of resettlement policies of Tibetan nomads threatens the survival of a way of life that is integral to Tibetan identity as well as the livelihoods of Tibetan nomads resulting into the violation of further rights, such as the right to work. Despite the stated intention of rangeland conservation, the policies are also further threatening the survival of the rangelands and the unique biodiversity of the fragile high-altitude landscape.

Resettlement policies in Tibet are usually carried out without consultation or consent, and local people have no right to challenge them or refuse to participate. This is despite the fact that Chinese law, in accordance with international law, requires that those, who are to be moved off their land or are to have property confiscated, must be consulted and, if they are moved, compensated for their losses.

Moreover, the resettlement of Tibetan nomads is exacerbated by the absence of civil and political rights. The lack of popular participation in decision-making processes in China combined with restrictions on freedoms of expression and association as well as systemic discrimination against Tibetans, has limited victim efforts to seek recourse when land rights are violated. Although access to remedy is available in theory – through various petitioning mechanisms, local courts, and the Ministry of Land and Resources for example – in practice using these procedures commonly results in harassment, intimidation, or arbitrary detention.

The ethos of the Western Development Strategy is to create conditions which will encourage poor rural workers to towns or cities, where they will apparently become workers and consumers in a new ‘modern’ economy. However, Tibetans who are settled often have to go into debt—without having an assured future livelihood, as they are often deprived of their livestock—to pay for part of the cost of housing or the fencing that will divide and enclose the grasslands.

¹ Office for the Leading Group for Western Regions Development of the State Council: “Overall Plan of Western Region Development During the Tenth Five-Year Plan Period,” china.com.cn, February 27, 2000, <http://www.china.com.cn/market/hwc/400823.htm> (accessed March 29, 2010).

² Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter, Mission to China, 20 January 2012, http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session19/A-HRC-19-59-Add1_en.pdf

³ Tibet to invest 400 million yuan in nomad's settlement, CCTV, September 13, 2012. <http://english.cntv.cn/20120913/103363.shtml>

⁴ For the full CECC report, see: 2012 CECC Annual Report available at www.cecc.gov



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Some nomads are offered compensation packages when they are settled, though with no rangeland and negligible job prospects in a Chinese dominated economy, for many, the main concern is how long the compensation will last.

A key issue arising from the implementation of these policies is how nomads and farmers who have lost their land and livelihoods will make a sustainable living in the future, particularly given that they are ill-equipped to compete in the job market with the increasing number of more skilled Chinese workers. Development agencies active in remote parts of Tibet have reported to ICT that resettled nomads seldom receive training in new skills, and they often have no access to health or social welfare.

One of the main impacts of the settlement of nomads has been a lack of social cohesion engendered by the traditional communal nomadic lifestyle. Unemployment faced by nomads who have lost their livelihoods, and often their livestock, is leading to community and family breakdowns, alcoholism, and crime. As grazing areas elsewhere, too, become scarce, disputes among Tibetan nomads are on the rise. Arguably Beijing's top-down approach to implementing policy has undermined traditional means of resolving these conflicts through the involvement of local figures of influence, such as Tibetan lamas.

The environmental impacts of Chinese rangeland policies are equally unsettling. Ironically, Beijing's policy of *'tuimu huancao'*, or 'withdraw from pasture to re-grow grassland' and the fencing of the grasslands may actually be contributing to further degradation. According to grasslands specialists, livestock must be mobile to prevent degradation of the environment and to maintain rangeland health, the basis of extensive grazing systems throughout the world. Traditionally, Tibet's grasslands were unfenced and nomads practiced seasonal migration, allowing for sufficient time for replenishment of pastures. However, under the policies of relocation and fencing, remaining livestock are confined and their grazing land limited, leading to overgrazing and further degradation.

Fundamentally, the Chinese authorities regard nomadic pastoralism as 'unscientific' and in need of modernization, often attributing grasslands degradation in Tibetan areas to the 'unsophisticated' practices of Tibetan nomads. This perception, which focuses solely on the importance of economic development and depicts rangelands as simply a resource to sustain livestock, leads to the marginalization of expert Tibetan views on the management of the grasslands and does not take into account the values of indigenous pastoralists.

Officials cite environmental preservation and economic development as the leading drives for nomad relocation, however, the additional element of administrative control over people's movements and lifestyles is also a draw for authorities. Nomad policies represent the further consolidation of centralized power, extending Beijing's grasp to the far reaches of the Tibetan plateau. Additionally, most Chinese authorities share the viewpoint that if Tibetans become richer, their faith in religion and the Dalai Lama will fade, indicating the official line of ensuring political 'stability' through countering 'separatism' through development.

China has so far fallen behind in its efforts to stem the rate of grassland degradation and promote ecological sustainability among the nomadic population. Rangelands experts say that the reasons for this failure are complex, but center around inappropriate policies. Grassland degradation can only be halted and reversed by examining the forces that affect the people who are using the grasslands. Research must be participatory, involving local Tibetans, if it is to be effective: sustainable rangeland use throughout western China depends on the local-level users of the land. Experts with long experience of working with Tibetan nomads say that there is a real risk that the nomad way of life will be undermined, even destroyed, due to modern notions of development based on faulty evidence, negative stereotypes, and untested assumptions.