

Oxfam Hong Kong's advocacy work on relocation of rural schools in China

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Policy Background

- In 2000, the Chinese Central Government announced a policy to relocate rural schools, with a view to providing better quality education through concentrating financial and human resources in fewer 'complete schools', that is, schools with grades one through six, at township and village level. Many of the schools would be turned into boarding schools to provide accommodation for students from remote rural communities.
- The policy also stipulates that all junior primary schools, that is, schools only with grades one to two or three, would be abolished if they were located within a three-kilometre radius of the central township or village level schools. The purpose is to abolish at least half of the rural schools while keeping those that are in the most remote areas.

Implementation of the Policy

- As an example, the Guizhou provincial government issued several directives in 2000 and 2001 to implement the policy in the province¹. A provincial plan was drawn up to abolish rural schools, especially junior schools, in stages. This was considered as one of the major measures benefiting the people in 2001.
- The number of schools abolished in a Chang Shun County at Guizhou Province is shown below:

Chang Shun County Guizhou Province	Number of Schools in 2001	Number of Schools Abolished in 2004	Number of Schools Not Abolished According to Plan	Number of Schools in 2004
Central Primary Schools at Township Centre	12	0	0	12
Village Level Complete Primary Schools	79	1	3	78
Village Level Junior Primary Schools	63	35	7	28

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- As can be seen, more than half of the village level junior primary schools were abolished. It is noteworthy that the original plan was to abolish 42 junior primary schools from the original 63. But the local government found it too difficult to do so in those remote areas.

Impacts of the Policy

- In densely populated areas in the plains with convenient means of transportation, the policy has helped provide better quality education through concentrating resources and economy of scale.
- However, in mountainous areas in western China, implementation of the policy without considerations of the local situation has resulted in a number of adverse effects:
 - A new wave of school drop-outs as the students now have to walk a long way to schools; this is especially true for girls. Most local governments in poor western regions do not have enough resources to run boarding schools. Even in some places where boarding schools are being established, schools do not have adequate staff to take care of the pupils who come at a very young age.
 - Children attending schools at a later age, eight years old instead of six.
 - Increase in the costs of education for farm households.
 - Waste of school infrastructure at the village level while the central schools are too full.
 - Conflicts between villages on which school to be abolished and which to be kept.

Oxfam's Position

- Many of the junior primary schools should not be abolished. Instead of concentrating resources in the central schools, more resources should be devoted to improving education at village schools. Some of the closed schools should be reopened.
- More support should be given to teachers at remote village schools; many of them are teaching in ethnic minority areas with multi-grade classes.
- It is very difficult for local governments to run boarding schools without a big increase in resources from the central government. Sending children to boarding schools at very young age may not be appropriate, as they would be separated from their families; many of the schools also lack adequate resources to take care of the young pupils.

Oxfam's Work Programme

- Support for research work in Guizhou, Guangxi, Shaanxi provinces from 2001-2006 to look at the impacts of the policy; many adverse impacts were identified and policy recommendations made.
- Seminars and meetings to discuss the issues.
- Publication of articles, e.g. an article on the issue in an influential Annual Education Blue Book.
- Documentary film, photo-exhibition and publication of photo-album on the issue.
- National People's Congress and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference' delegates making proposals to urge the government to handle the issue differently.
- Media reporting.
- Direct support of remote village schools in terms of infrastructure and teacher's training.

Effects of the Advocacy Work

- Enhanced public understanding of the issue.
- Wide media coverage of the meetings and seminars, photo-exhibition, school projects of Oxfam.
- Ministry of Education issued a directive in June 2006 urging local governments to cautiously implement the policy according the local situations. The Ministry acknowledged many of the adverse effects identified in Oxfam's research and emphasised that every effort should be made to ensure that young children could go to schools at their vicinity while boarding schools would also be established in some areas.
- Oxfam continues to monitor whether and how this directive would be implemented at the local level. It remains to be seen whether some of the local government would reopen some of the abolished schools.

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Notes

¹ Guizhou is a poor mountainous province in southwest China.