

Guarding against land-expropriation-related mass incidents (LRRMIs) : practical evidence from China's local governments

ABSTRACT

China has produced a brilliant transcript in developing its economy and promoting urbanization since 1980s. Among the numerous explanations for the so-called “China Miracle”, a view that focuses on the government-dominated mode of land development was greatly acknowledged and expanded. In this mode, large-scale rural land has been compulsorily expropriated from peasants to meet the demand for urban expansion, yet with a non-market based compensation. Meanwhile, although gained an excellent performance in the field of economic development, China is faced with serious challenges brought by increasing social protests in that of social governance, the term of “mass incident” was created to politically conceptualize them. Coincidentally, in rural areas, the vast majority of mass incidents were related with the unreasonable or illegal land expropriation, which would be called as land-expropriation-related mass incidents (LERMIs).

In this paper, we intend to show how China's local governments guard against LERMIs. Even though coping with mass incident has two dimensions, one is to nip any possible mass incident in the bud beforehand, and the other means emergency actions to an occurred mass incident, we prefer focus on the former as the sufficient prevention towards a latent mass incident is of priority in the governance agenda. Furthermore, our interests on the behavior of local governments but not that of the central government is for the following reasons. Firstly, a series of sensitive issues that easily trigger LERMIs are mostly unilaterally decided by local governments, in a sense a LERMI is the aftereffect of local government behaviors. Secondly, local governments are most often the direct targets of LERMIs as land-deprived peasants normally believe that a perversion of central policies by local officials accounts for their appeals. Lastly, local officials are under pressure from an evaluation system that primarily emphasizes maintaining social stability in their prefectures, which directly incents them to eliminate potential LERMIs.

As a whole, our focus is to describe and analyze the actual practices of local governments that aim to prevent the occurrence of LERMIs. We also attempt to clarify the governance logic of such practices by addressing these major issues: 1) How will local governments respond when the central authority arranges them to take unified actions that are designed to prevent LERMIs? 2) What specific strategies will local governments innovatively use to achieve the ultimate of zero LERMIs? 3) Which kind of values is reflected from this hybrid coping paradigm? It needs to be stressed that this paper is not just a simple summary of the so-called Chinese experience in a specific field, as there is also considerable scope for an exchange of good practices in guarding against LERMIs. Large-scale land requisition is commonly sweeping across developing worlds, none of government-dominated land takings or private investor purchasing, experiences evidenced by China's local practices can provide lessons for other developing countries in the field of preventing land expropriation conflicts, especially for Sub-Saharan African countries that have confronted these potential challenges more recently.

We first construct a comprehensive three-dimensional theoretic framework to define the boundary, to uncover the incentives, and to recognize the features of involved practices. Firstly, the discussions on the evolution process of a LERMI provide clear evidence for identifying the practices that ought to be recognized as the actions towards guarding against LERMIs; secondly, the theory of the local

government behavior can be used to uncover the incentives behind local governments practices in guarding against LERMIs; and lastly, the rationality model proposed by Max Weber will be used to understand and recognize what beliefs the local governments adhere to in guarding against LERMIs.

We then, based on different incidents mentioned in the theory part, break various local practices down into two categories, which are respectively called as common local practices and specific local practices. Just as the names appear, the former includes a series of homogeneous practices that are common across the country, the incentive of which is mostly as a top-down political response to the central's will that announced by formal documents, while the latter points to heterogeneous practices that are always spontaneously adopted by an individual or some local governments as tactics. On the basis of description evidenced by detailed data and/or cases, each practice falls under the corresponding category. As a result, the common local practices include improving procedure normalization and information disclosure, formulating and regularly adjusting official compensation standard, constructing a multiple security mechanism for land-deprived peasants, adopting the social stability risk assessment (SSRA) for land expropriation, and establishing the system of coordination and arbitration for resolving land expropriation disputes; and the specific practices include promoting cross-sectoral collaboration and holistic governance, and implementing the Administrative Contract System (ACS) in land expropriation.

We further argue that both of them follow a central tenet of instrumental orientation, namely, emphasizing the effectiveness and operability of policy instruments. As to the common ones, it is corroborated by local governments' paying more attention to promote the stylization and quantification in the fields of regulating procedure, formulating and renewing compensation standards, resolving disputes, and evaluating risks, while the specific ones are always outcome-orientation organization strategies to maintain overall stability in a relatively short term. In detail, local governments rarely have autonomy and bargaining room to implement the will of central authority, the optimization selection for them is to adopt the standardization process designed by the central to improve working efficiency and win political recognition. Their instrumental rationality is shown more in the aspect of working approaches. As a comparison, the instrumental rationality reflected from the specific local practices is more of an outcome-orientation concept, it stimulates local governments to explore more flexible measures in accordance with local conditions within or without the vested policy framework by the central government.