



Center for Social Development

GEORGE WARREN BROWN SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

POLICY BRIEF

| SEPTEMBER 2015 | CSD PUBLICATION NO. 15-49 |

Asset-Based Policy in China: Applied Projects and Policy Progress

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Summary

Since the Center for Social Development (CSD) at Washington University in St. Louis introduced the idea of asset building in China in 2004, asset-based projects and policy discussion have drawn great attention from the central government and mainstream media. CSD research and consultation have played a central role in these developments.

In collaboration with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, CSD conducted a three-year (2005-2008) research project documenting the government-endorsed asset-building demonstration project in Xin Jiang Uygur Autonomous Region.

CSD has also been involved in a collaborative research effort led by the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and Sichuan University using the asset-building theme to help earthquake-affected families and communities recover from the 2008 disaster and develop over the long term.

Asset building and social development has been adopted as a theme to guide a body of productive research by the China Social Work Research Center since fall 2010.

CSD is collaborating with Peking University, the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs, UNICEF China, and State

Council to explore the potential of implementing Child Development Accounts for disadvantaged children in China, in addition to other potential research projects with different Chinese Universities. Chinese-language publications on asset building have assisted the knowledge dissemination and added value to the policy discussion and academic research.

Conferences

Considerable progress toward an inclusive asset-based policy has occurred through a series of conferences at which CSD interacted with Chinese researchers, political leaders, and policy advocates:

In September 2004, CSD co-sponsored a conference with Shandong University on Asset Building and Social Development.¹ This meeting generated substantial discussion and interest in asset-based policy, and other meetings were quickly planned.

In January 2005, Michael Sherraden was keynote speaker at two conferences in Beijing on asset-based policy, one sponsored by Tsinghua University and the other by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS).² The CASS meeting was entitled *A New Trend in Social Development: Construction of Asset-Based Social Policy*.

These conferences, in turn, led to Michael Sherraden's



invited participation as an international expert at the 21st Century Forum, *Sustainable Development: China and the World*,³ in September 2005. At this meeting, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao spoke positively about the potential of asset-based policy in China.

In November 2007, Li Zou and Baorong Guo of CSD and CASS participated in a major meeting with the Chinese Ministry of Labor and Social Security (MLSS) on how asset-building concepts and knowledge from the Xin Jiang pilot project can be applied at the national level.

In December 2009, Michael Sherraden delivered the keynote speech at the first Chinese Social Work Research Conference in Wuhan, Hubei, using research on asset-based policy as the main example. Social work scholars from all of China were present.

In 2012, Peking University and CSD cosponsored the conference on *Lifelong Asset Building: Innovations and Strategies in Asia*, bringing together scholars, practitioners, policymakers, government officials, donors, and other key stakeholders in the Asia-Pacific Region to share strategies and chart promising directions to advance asset building research and policy in Asia and beyond.

Role of research

Major presentations at the initial conferences were research-based, summarizing key findings and pointing to policy implications. The 21st Century Forum was policy-oriented—focused on political implications of research findings related to social development during China’s economic development. Although research does not always inform social policy in China, Chinese social scientists seemed to be impressed by Individual Development Account (IDA) research from the American Dream Demonstration, which played an influential role in these discussions.

The joint effort of CSD and CASS to document and analyze the Hutubi pilot project in Xin Jiang have been valuable in informing national policy. Scholars from Beijing University and the Chinese government have also consulted on research activities. A consensus has emerged that helping every citizen (urban and rural) accumulate assets is an effective pathway as the country “builds a harmonious countryside” in a “scientific development” perspective.

In response to the 2008 Sichuan earthquake relief effort, CSD has been collaborating with Hong Kong Polytechnic University and Sichuan University using asset building as a guiding theme to help earthquake-affected families and communities recover from the disaster and develop over the long term.

Since the China Social Work Research Center adopted asset building and social development as a research theme, a group of scholars from CSD, Peking University, and Hong Kong Polytechnic University have been working closely on this joint effort.

In June 2014, China Social Work Research Center and Xinjiang University coorganized a conference on *Asset building, Poverty Reduction and Child Welfare Policy*. This conference resulted in a special issue on asset building and child welfare forthcoming in *Journal of Zhejiang Gongshang University*, 2015.

At this writing, CSD is collaborating with Peking University, the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs, UNICEF China, and State Council to explore the potential of testing Child Development Accounts for disadvantaged children in China.

Discussion

Some Chinese social scientists and policymakers have become enthusiastic about the potential of asset-based policy, proposing that inclusion in asset building become a core theme in China’s social policy. CSD’s theoretical and empirical work on asset-based policy is cited prominently in these discussions, and terminology that CSD introduced to frame these ideas is now used routinely.

Reflecting these developments, since CSD introduced the concept of asset building in China at the Shandong conference in 2004, asset-building discussions have been featured in Chinese print media and on Chinese television and radio. An example is a feature story on the Hutubi pilot study, broadcast internationally by China Radio International on April 17, 2006, as a segment in the series, “Window to China.” This program features the Hutubi project as an innovative solution to investing in rural peasants’ long-term well-being, and includes an interview with Michael Sherraden.

In a recent baidu search, over 600,000 results on asset building were found in online versions of Chinese media. Some examples are in the appendix.

Policy progress

Although social development has been a popular concept in recent years, it was not until the introduction of asset building that some Chinese scholars realized that it is a tangible tool for social development. Perhaps the most noteworthy policy developments are that the following:

(1) The 16th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in October 2006 set “universal increase of household wealth” as one of the key directives for building a harmonious socialist society by 2020. This is a significant step towards asset-based social policy.

(2) In the 18th CPC National Congress in 2012, the Chinese government vowed to build an “all-round well-off society” by 2020. Financial well-off is part of this tool.

Context

Several contextual circumstances in China are important to keep in mind: (1) One context of these discussions is President Xi Jinping’s calls for pursuing the Chinese dream to rejuvenate the country and improve people’s livelihood. Asset-based policy is viewed as one possible avenue to make it happen. (2) Another context is the aging society and the pressure to protect individual’s wealth. The Chinese government is considering establishing a U.S. 401-equivalent retirement savings scheme. This is a positive sign of developing asset-based policy in China. (3) The third context is the development focus of asset building. China appreciates the long-term development of individuals, families, and communities in the concept of asset building.

Caveats, concerns, challenges

(1) While the latest discussions in China have included central advisory committees and high-ranking officials, national discussions are in early stages. Although the potential may be great, it is not possible to predict how these discussions will develop. (2) As always, the policy landscape is not benign. While some policy thinkers in China have a vision of including asset building while maintaining other social supports, others have a vision of reducing or eliminating social insurance and substituting an asset-building program. (3) The most critical challenge will be reaching the rural poor in China, a population largely left out of both economic development and social policy benefits. (4) Increasing government attention to child protection and development presents new

opportunities. The budget allocated to improve vulnerable children’s welfare provision has increased significantly in recent years, and this may create resource flows for Child Development Accounts.

Potential

Obviously, with 1.3 billion people in China, the potential is enormous. With growing discussion and applied projects, there is an opportunity to inform a larger and more inclusive asset-based policy in China.

Selected publications

Numerous research meetings and policy discussions have generated a growing body of work in Chinese. Proceedings from the Shandong conference in 2004 have been published in both Chinese and English. *Assets and the Poor* (1991) was published in Chinese by the Commercial Press (China) in the summer of 2005. *Can the Poor Save?* (2006) is being translated into Mandarin. Selected publications are as follows:

“普适性的儿童发展账户：美国SEED OK政策实验的早期研究经验。”桑德拉·贝福利¹，玛格丽特·科蓝西¹，迈克尔·史乐山¹郭葆荣²，黄进³，邹莉¹” forthcoming in *Zhejiang Gongshang University Journal*.

Sherraden, M., Zou, L., Deng, S., Ku, H., & Wang, S. (Eds.), (2015), *Asset-Building Policies and Innovations in Asia*. Oxford, UK: Routledge.

邓锁，迈克尔·谢若登，邹莉，王思斌，古学斌。(主编)(2014). *资产建设亚洲的策略和创新*。北京，中国：北京大学出版社。

Huang, J., Jin, M., Deng, S., Guo, B., Zou, L., & Sherraden, M. (2013). Asset Poverty in Urban China: A Study Using the 2002 Chinese Household Income Project. *Journal of Social Policy*, 42(4), 763-781.

Sherraden, M., Zou, L., Deng, S., Ku, H., & Wang, S. (Eds.) (2013), *Lifelong Asset Building*[Special Issue]. *China Journal of Social Work*, 6 (2).

Gao, J., & Zhan, M., eds. (2005). *资产建设与社会发展*，北京：社会文献科学出版社。

Gao, J., Zhan, M., Cheng, L., & Zou, L., eds. (2005). *Chinese Social Issues and Social Policy*, special issue, *Social Development Issues* (27).

Guo, B., Huang, J., Sherraden, M., & Zou, L. (2008). Dual incentives and dual asset building: Policy implications of the Hutubi Rural Social Security Loan Program in China. *Journal of Social Policy*, 37(3), 453-470.

Guo, B., Huang, J., Zou, L., & Sherraden, M. (2008). Asset-based policy in rural China: An innovation in the Retirement Social Insurance Program. *China Journal of Social Work*, 1(1), 63-76.

Sherraden, M. (2005). 资产与穷人. 高鉴国译、展敏校, 北京: 商务印书馆。

Sherraden, M. (2005). Asset Building in the United States and the Rest of the World, *新华文摘* 10:146-149 [also published in part as the opening chapter of 资产建设与社会发展, 北京: 社会文献科学出版社, 2005, pp 1-17; also published in part in 中国社会工作研究 (第三辑), 北京: 社会文献科学出版社, 2005].

Sherraden, M., & Zou, L. (2005). 个人发展账户—“美国梦”示范工程. *江苏社会科学* 2: 201-205.

Zou, L., & Sherraden, M. (2009). From “dead” savings to assets for life: Perspectives on the Retirement Social Insurance Pilot Project in Hutubi, China.” *Asia Pacific Journal of Social Work and Development*, 19(1), 96-115.

Zou, L., & Sherraden, M. (2010). Assets for children: Experiences in Asia and implications for China. *Journal of US-China Education Review*, 7(8), 87-94.

Appendix: Selected media coverage of asset-based policy in China and Asia

- » Social Sciences in China News Coverage on Asset Building, Anti-poverty and Child Welfare policies Conference in 2014 http://www.cssn.cn/zx/zx_gx/news/201406/t20140624_1224130.shtml
- » China Social Sciences: “Asset Building helps realize social equity” Peking University News: November 21, 2012, <http://www.csstoday.net/Item/32886.aspx>
- » Peking University News: November 22, 2012, 2007, “International Conference on Lifelong Asset Building: Innovations and Strategies in Asia kicked off at PKU.” http://pkunews.pku.edu.cn/xxfz/2012-11/22/content_258630.htm
- » Harvard Kennedy School Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation: 2009, Reform of the Social Endowment Insurance System for Rural Areas. <http://www.innovations.harvard.edu/awards.html?id=133241>

This reports that Hutubi’s innovation on Social Endowment Insurance has won the “Local Government with the Best Sense of Responsibility” award.

Representative excerpt: “At present, this reform has been recognized as effective by the Ministry of Labor and Social Security and has been studied by scholars in China and abroad.”

- » China Xinjiang News (中国新疆网): January 29, 2008, “Hutubi County won the Chinese Award for Innovation in Local Governance.” http://www.chinaxinjiang.cn/dzdt/changjizhou/t20080129_319665.htm

It reports that the rural social insurance program in Hutubi County won the award at the 4th National Competition for Innovation in Local Governance. This is the first time a local Xinjiang government branch has ever won such an award.

Representative excerpt: “The research project launched by Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Washington University, and Hutubi government aims to learn from Hutubi’s experience and explore the possibility of scaling up nationally.”

- » Xinhua News Agency: October 24, 2007, “Full text of Hu Jintao’s report at the 17th Party Congress.” http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2007-10/24/content_6938749_7.htm

President Hu laid out China’s directions for the next five years (2008-2013). Amongst these is a directive incorporating asset building into government planning. The concepts of development through asset accumulation and inclusion in asset building are articulated.

Representative excerpt: “Conditions will be created to enable more citizens to have property income.”

- » The Straights Times (海峡时报): June 30, 2007, “Asia fighting poverty by helping poor to save.” http://www.straitstimes.com/Free/Story/STIStory_134250.html

This article describes how the poor can benefit tremendously from mainstream financial services if they are given the opportunity. The Hutubi project in Xinjiang was cited as an example of financial institutions reaching farmers, non-traditional customers for financial institutions in rural China.

Representative excerpt: *“In China—where millions live in rural areas under poor living conditions—a local government initiative called the Hu Du Bi project in a county in western China has been attracting the central government’s attention. It allows farmers to withdraw money from their social insurance accounts as loans for investments in agriculture.”*

- » China Economic Times (中国经济时报): December 15, 2006, “Hutubi Retirement Model—Innovation in China.” <http://www.cet.com.cn/20061215/YAOWEN/2006121533.htm>

This article indicates the official government perception of asset-building work. The government views the “Hutubi model” of retirement insurance as innovative in “turning dead money into live assets” by allowing rural peasants to borrow funds to invest in development. The article describes our three-party research effort (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Center for Social Development, and Hutubi County) as aiming to summarize the model’s experience, study the possibility of national rollout, and supplement asset-based theory with empirical evidence.

Representative excerpt: *“The innovative Hutubi developmental model attracted tremendous attention in China. In August 2005, the Chinese Ministry of Labor and Social Security introduced the Hutubi model as an example for the rest of the country.”*

- » Xinhua News Agency: October 2006

The 16th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in October 2006 set “universal increase of household wealth” as one of the key directives for building a harmonious socialist society by 2020. This is a significant step towards asset-based social policy. Detailed information about this announcement is available online: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2006-10/11/content_5191071.htm

- » Xin Jiang Daily (新疆日报): May 10, 2006, “Effective attempt in breaking through the barriers to using rural insurance funds.” <http://www.xjdaily.com/news/cjkj/103718.shtml>

This local newspaper article states that the practice of using rural retirement insurance cards as collateral for borrowing in Hutubi County, Xin Jiang, has been explored as an effective new approach to breaking through the local barriers to loan access.

Representative excerpt: *“The Hutubi practice indicates that adopting asset building into the current rural insurance system, thereby allowing peasants to directly manage and operate their individual accounts, is likely to open a new era in China’s rural insurance program.”*

- » Chinese Radio International (中国国际广播电台): April 17, 2006, “The ‘Hutubi Model’ brings joy to the peasants.” <http://gb.chinabroadcast.cn/1321/2006/04/17/661@1003979.htm>

A feature story on the Hutubi pilot study was broadcast internationally by China Radio International as a segment in the series, “Window to China.” This program featured the Hutubi project as an innovative solution to investing in rural peasants’ long-term well being, and included an interview of Professor Sherraden (with a Chinese voice-over).

- » People’s Daily (人民网): March 8, 2006, “Social insurance: Making individual accounts flexible after their implementation.” <http://finance.people.com.cn/GB/1047/4178313.html>

Making individual accounts flexible enough to provide collateral for mid-term loans will help meet basic needs of social insurance participants such as home purchase, education, health care, and agricultural development.

- » Xin Jiang Daily (新疆日报): Aug. 16, 2005, 8:18:00, “Building assets for the poor—a report on the rural insurance card for loans project in Hutubi County.” <http://www.xjdaily.com.cn/xwzx/gzgc/57199.shtml>

The asset-building pilot project in Xin Jiang province has been highly successful in encouraging individuals to rethink the social insurance paradigm. This article from a newspaper in western China shows that asset-based concepts are emerging at all levels, especially in Xin Jiang province.

Representative excerpt: *“. . . Asset-based social policy could become the main theme in Chinese rural insurance. The existing system of rural insurance is based mainly on redistribution of income and choice of expenditures, which overlooks the functions of production and investment.”*

- » Economic Information Daily (经济参考报): Aug. 13, 2005, “Policy recommendations on breaking the social insurance deadlock for low-income urban dwellers.” <http://jjckb.xinhuanet.com/www/Article/2005813174023-1.shtml>

Prior to the 21st Century Forum, major media began issuing calls for the development of universal asset-building tools in the form of Michael Sherraden's Individual Development Accounts.

Representative excerpt: "Given the new challenges facing Chinese social insurance for low-income urban dwellers, it is important to centralize all the available resources and strengthen the linkage between systems. However, the fundamental strategy is to change our mindset. It would be an effective path if individual development accounts are established for the urban poor."

- » People's Daily (人民网): July 25, 2005, 10:33, "Can the Hutubi Model solve problems in rural insurance?" <http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/40557/49139/49140/3566526.html>

This article in one of China's most prominent newspapers shows the government's enthusiasm for developing a universal asset-based policy tool.

Representative excerpt: "Dr. Zhang Shifei from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences believes that the practice of Hutubi instilled the idea of asset building, which transforms the farmers' individual accounts from retirement only to a multi-functional development account. While it secures farmers' retirement, it also encourages farmers to invest the money in their individual accounts to address urgent needs such as education, medical expenses, and making profits."

- » West Times (西部时报): July 4, 2005, 10:36:33, "The 'Hutubi Model' is the icebreaker for Chinese rural insurance." http://www.westtimes.com/news/2005_7/20057410391159663_2.shtml

By the summer, Michael Sherraden's comments on asset-building and social policy appeared regularly in major newspapers across the country.

Representative excerpt: "Dr. Sherraden believes that Hutubi practice is developing towards asset building. He proposed that once the project has been proved successful, it is possible to consider expanding it nationwide."

- » Chinese Securities Journal (中国证券报): May 27, 2005, 08:33:47, "The Hutubi model of rural insurance: breakthrough and challenges." http://big5.xinhuanet.com/gate/big5/www.cs.com.cn/bxtd/01/t20050527_677492.htm

In late May, the effects of asset-building concepts

had already begun to be felt by peasants in rural China. This article quoting Dr. Zhang Shifei indicates the depth of the growing foundation of asset-based concepts in China.

Representative excerpt: "Dr. Zhang Shifei from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences believes that the success of Hutubi County farmers using insurance cards to obtain loans resulted from breaking through the existing limitations of rural insurance systems, and adopting the idea of asset building, which allows farmers to invest their accumulated assets for the improvement of their long-term well-being."

- » Gazette of the Chinese Academy of Social Science (中国社会科学院院报): Mar. 29, 2005, 14:15:07, "Asset-based social policy—a revolution in social policy." <http://www.cass.net.cn/webnew/file/2005032933479.html>

In March of 2005, an article appeared in the periodical that is sent by CASS to Chinese policymakers, describing asset-based policy as the key to permanently alleviating many of the problems associated with China's rapid development.

Representative excerpt: "Obviously, the goal of asset-based social policy is to help everyone in society get rid of poverty permanently and live a happy life through cross-generational asset accumulation and development."

- » Chinese Securities Journal (中国证券报): March 08, 2005, 08:15:37, "Social insurance for low-income individuals in the context of social inequality." http://www.cs.com.cn/bxtd/01/t20050308_603669.htm

By March of 2005, the nationwide discussion had grown to encompass the indirect benefits of asset accumulation. This article showed a deep understanding of the subtleties that distinguish asset-building and support of basic livelihood, and showed that CSD's research had reached the top leaders in Chinese social thought.

Representative excerpt: "Mr. JING Tiankui, Director of the Sociology Institute at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences said: 'Although income and expenditures secure people's basic needs, they cannot improve people's living conditions in the long run and cannot help them gain greater economic independence. Therefore, studying asset-based social policy has great significance in the context of harmonious society.'"

- » Chinese Finance Website (中国金融网): Feb. 28, 2005, 07:36, "Scholars proposed 'asset building' to aid reform of retirement insurance." <http://www.zgjr.com/News/2005228/Insurance/371874249400.html>

The conferences in early 2005 were a tremendous success, and the discussion in the media moved from debate about whether asset building was a good idea to how asset-based concepts should be implemented at a large scale in China. This comes from a highly respected source of financial news and opinion in China. policymakers, describing asset-based policy as the key to permanently alleviating many of the problems associated with China's rapid development.

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Endnotes

1. Washington University has a cordial partnership with Shandong University, with strong ties are in social work and social policy.
2. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences is the leading government institute on the social sciences.
3. The September 2005 meeting was the third 21st Century Forum. The first two were held in 1996 and 2000.

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