



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) Submission: Cultural Rights and Sustainable Development

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The International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) is a not-for-profit advocacy group that works to promote human rights and democratic freedoms for the people of Tibet. In this submission, we aim to highlight the dangerous Chinese government practice of excluding cultural rights in the blind pursuit of economic development in Tibet. In particular, top-down uniform development programs aimed at poverty alleviation have seriously threatened the health and sustainability of local cultures, communities, and their environment. Any economic gains that have been made are temporary and not sustainable, as projects have not adapted to local cultures to ensure long-term engagement.

This submission focuses on the experience of Tibetans under Chinese rule. When we refer to Tibet, we are speaking about the historical region of Tibet that now encompasses the Tibet Autonomous Region, and autonomous prefectures and counties of Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan in the People's Republic of China.

Identity and culture are pre-requisites for human development

When we look at examples of successful human development experiences, the Basque country and its socio-economic transformation in the 1980s from a struggling industrial economy to a service economy comes to mind.¹ The Basque experience is particularly powerful because it is a counter-example of how human development can be meaningfully achieved in regions with distinct cultures and nations.

Today's Basque country enjoys the greatest autonomy inside a nation-state than any other region in the world. Its economic transformation from a fledgling industrial economy in the 1970s to a resilient service economy based on solidarity presents a real model for sustainable regional economic and social development. However, in the 1980s, the Basque administration was confronted with an obsolete industrial structure, with high unemployment and an uneducated workforce. It is from this position of desperation and a desire for change, that the Basque government, together with its people, defined and built a new way of working and living that could achieve both happiness and security.

When speaking about what was necessary for the Basque country to undertake systemic social change and create a model of sustainable development, the Former President of the

¹ Juan Jose Ibarretxe Markuartu, uploaded 22 May 2020, 'The Basque Case: A Comprehensive Model of Sustainable Human Development', George Mason University School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, <https://www.agirrecenter.eus/en/publications/the-basque-case-a-comprehensive-model-of-sustainable-human-development/>.



Basque Country and Chair of Agirre Lehendakaria Center for Social and Political Studies, Juan Jose Ibarretxe argued a focus on identity and culture, and self-government was essential.

Ibarretxe argued culture underscores every human effort and it is culture that gives life meaning. Helen Clark, former New Zealand Prime Minister and former Administrator of the UN Development Program reaffirmed this point, arguing: “culture is a vital aspect of human development, to live lives they value, people must be free to choose their identity, and thus to define who they are” (UNDP, 2013).

Without local culture, socio-economic transformation and development cannot be achieved. It is essential that people have the space and freedom to express their culture and draw on their culture to define their vision for the future. In the Basque case, local leaders understood that respecting and emphasizing the bonds that connected the Basque people was critical to creating the solidarity that was needed to undertake and achieve sustainable socio-economic development.²

There is a misperception that all cultures should integrate into one similar global society that captures ideas of modernity. However, local cultures need to be preserved so that solutions to global challenges can be designed to serve best the needs of local people. In a 2014 interview, Pope Francis also highlighted this reality, arguing:

“A healthy globalization is like a polyhedron: all together, but each retaining its identity. [...] The [current] misunderstood globalisation is like a sphere: all points are equal, all equidistant from the center”.³

The Basque experience also highlights the critical role of self-government and agency in human development. When reflecting on the Basque experience, Ibarretxe reasoned that without self-government and agency, a nation or a community cannot preserve its cultural identity, empower its people and design solutions that serve the needs and values of the local people.

The importance of culture and agency in developing Tibet was explicitly emphasized by Kerstin Leitner, the resident representative of the U.N. Development Program in China. At the first forum on international aid for Tibet, Leitner reasoned, “Without their [Tibetan peoples’] active engagement and cooperation, any development program will not take root in the Tibetan community and thus will only have a very limited impact.”⁴

² Ellie Hopgood, 26 October 2020, ‘All Together, or Not at All’, Medium, <https://medium.com/transformation-capital/all-together-or-not-at-all-lessons-from-the-basque-countrys-economic-revival-ecd455837913>.

³ An interview given to Henrique Cymerman, 2014. The same sentiment was also expressed by the pope on 27 September 2015. See 6abc, 27 September 2015, ‘VIDEO: Pope Francis’ give impassioned remarks on globalization’, <https://6abc.com/independence-mall-pope-francis/1003739/>.

⁴ Cultural Survival, No date, ‘TIBET: U.N. identifies Tibetan expression as factor in foreign aid’, <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/news/tibet-un-identifies-tibetan-expression-factor-foreign-aid>.



QUESTIONNAIRE

I. The cultures of development

1. What is your understanding of what “development” should aspire to?

Development should aim to improve the quality of life individuals, which means giving people the freedom and opportunities to live lives they value:

- Freedom from poverty: sufficient food, clothing and shelter, health, and education
- Freedom from fear: safety and security in one’s natural, social and political environment.
- Freedom of speech: to participate in political and community life, including in religious activities.

2. How is development defined in your country?

The cornerstone of China’s development policy and concept is poverty alleviation. In recent years, environmental sustainability has been increasingly featured.

The Chinese discourse primarily views development as a process of technology-centred modernization.⁵ The Chinese state views development through the lens of historical realism and Marxist evolutionary theory, which assumes human progress is a linear path from savagery to civilization, and economic development can be used to create a civilized, common and unified nation.

In Tibet, development is used as a state-building tool to reduce ethnic difference and integrate and assimilate ‘relative backward’ nations on the periphery. Development is therefore focused on economic development and achieving absolute progress in material gains to eradicate poverty and improve peoples’ livelihood (defined as education, medical, and health services, and public welfare facilities).

While there are references to social development and green development in China’s more recent conceptions of development, such as the 13th Five Year Plan for Economic and Social Development⁶, social development is focused on creating ‘ideal’ civilized citizens while green development seeks to minimize environmental damage.

⁵ Marin Rudyak, 8 June 2021, ‘Development’, The China Media Project, https://chinamediaproject.org/the_ccp_dictionary/development/.

⁶ Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, March 2016, ‘The 13th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development of the People’s Republic of China (2016-2020)’, <https://en.ndrc.gov.cn/policies/202105/P020210527785800103339.pdf>.



3. Has your country developed and adopted a (sustainable) development strategy?

China's 2016 National Plan on Implementation of the '2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' outlines poverty alleviation, ecological civilization, and global climate and sustainability governance as the three main goals of its sustainability development strategy.⁷

China's current development philosophy and goal is to promote a 'people-centred innovative, coordinated, green, open and shared development'⁸. Despite its ostensibly holistic approach to human wellbeing, it is primarily focused on increasing economic productivity through new technological methods.

4. Who are the main stakeholders defining, driving and monitoring the (sustainable) development process?

The National Development and Reform Commission drafts the Five-Year economic and social development plans, however it is not exactly clear who the additional main stakeholders are.

5. Are there participatory processes influencing and informing the definition and evaluation of (sustainable) development policies? If so, how?

While in Tibetan areas free speech, and dissenting views on government policies altogether, are subject to persecution, incarceration or other repressive measures, a truly participatory approach to the definition and evaluation of development policies, for example according to principles of "Free, Prior and Informed Consent" of affected communities, is not possible.

6. Have the development priorities or the assistance provided by international organisations impacted negatively on some aspects of your country's (sustainable) development policies?

On July 7th, 2000, the World Bank Board of Executive Directors rejected Bank Management's support of the China Western Poverty Reduction Project, which centered on the resettlement of 58,000 Chinese farmers into an area that is traditionally part of Tibet. The Board decision to reject Management's recommendation forced the Chinese government to withdraw the project from consideration.

The decision came on the heels of a scathing report from the independent World Bank Inspection Panel, which found that the World Bank had violated all of its most important social and environmental policies in the design of the project. The Inspection Panel process had been triggered by a claim filed by the International Campaign for Tibet (ICT), acting in

⁷ China Daily, September 2016, 'China's National Plan on Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development',

[http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/specials/China'sNationalPlanonimplementationofagenda\(EN\).pdf](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/specials/China'sNationalPlanonimplementationofagenda(EN).pdf).

⁸ Cao Desheng, 6 March 2021, 'Xi stresses coordinated, green and open model', China Daily, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202103/06/WS6042b294a31024ad0baad2c3.html>.



response to letters smuggled out of the project region by affected Tibetans who feared that the project would amount to nothing less than a “death sentence” for them.⁹

II. The cultural rights dimension of the sustainable development goals

- 7. In designing the strategy to achieve the SDGs, what consideration has been given to their cultural dimensions and to cultural rights? Which aspects have been considered?**

Not known.

- 8. How was the planning, implementation and monitoring of the strategy adapted to the cultural values, world views, practices and identities of the concerned persons? How was respect for diversity integrated in the process?**

Not known.

- 9. How were the persons concerned involved? Their diverse cultural resources, knowledge and capacities in various contexts capitalized? Has the strategy to achieve the SDGs been designed in a way that is culturally adequate and inclusive?**

China’s strategy to achieve sustainable development goals in Tibet have not been designed in a way that is culturally adequate or inclusive. They have in fact been designed to be detached as much as possible from Tibetan language and culture. This can be observed in China’s formulation and implementation of its educational, poverty alleviation, employment, and environmental conservation projects in Tibet.

Educational policies

Despite research showing native-language instruction leads to better academic outcomes,¹⁰ and legal instruments protecting the right of Tibetans to study and use their native language,¹¹ Tibetan language is not protected in practice. Tibetan language education has gradually been phased out at primary and secondary level schooling in favour of a Chinese-medium instruction model. A Tibetan scholar of education policy across China has estimated that at least 70 per cent of all schools across Tibet now use Chinese medium instruction, and all schools within the TAR have already completed the shift. This policy to replace Tibetan-medium instruction with Chinese-medium instruction was implemented according to the

⁹ CIEL, August 2000, ‘VICTORY! World Bank Effort to Support China’s Population Transfer into Tibet is Defeated!’, <https://www.ciel.org/news/victory-world-bank-effort-to-support-chinas-population-transfer-into-tibet-is-defeated/>.

¹⁰ Jessica Ball, 21 February 2014, ‘Children Learn Better in Their Mother Tongue’, Global Partnership for Education, <https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/children-learn-better-their-mother-tongue>.

¹¹ See Article 10, 21, 37 and 49 in People’s Republic of China Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law 2003 in Congressional-Executive Commission on China, 14 February 2006, ‘Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law of the People’s Republic of China (Chinese and English Text)’, <https://www.cecc.gov/resources/legalprovisions/regional-ethnic-autonomy-law-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china-amended>.



National Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020) and the Thirteenth Five Year Development Plan for National Language Works (2016-2020).¹²

Therefore, while China has improved education outcomes by enforcing 9 years of compulsory education in Tibet, they have failed to deliver culturally and linguistically appropriate education, which maximizes retention rates and academic performance. This concerted effort to phase out Tibetan language education and use has also extended to pre-school education, with requirements now for children to pass Chinese language tests to enroll into year 1 of school.¹³

In addition to these policies to eliminate Tibetan-language from the education system, we have also observed concerted efforts to eliminate Tibetan culture from the education experience. First, in tandem with the Chinese-medium education campaign, there has been a concerted effort to close schools using culturally Tibetan education materials. Second, a long-established ban on education materials that include references to Tibetan Buddhist religion, Tibetan identity or Tibetan history significantly limits student engagement in the learning materials. Third, the 2003 school consolidation policy, which replaced village schools with boarding schools in townships essentially forced children from the school age of five to live a way from their families and lose their connection to their families, community and their cultural world.

Poverty alleviation campaigns and resettlement

By the end of 2019, the Tibet Autonomous Region was allegedly freed from absolute poverty after 628,000 people were lifted out of poverty, according to Chinese state media reports.¹⁴ This included 266,000 farmers and herders who resettled into new housing settlements.

China's nomad settlement policy is often cited as a case exemplifying poverty alleviation and development; however, this is in fact a counter example of poverty alleviation.

Since the 1980s¹⁵, state policies have sought to move pastoral nomads from their grasslands to 'civilize' Tibetans and render the frontier regions governable. Officially, the policy seeks to preserve the grasslands and improve the socio-economic situation of nomads.¹⁶ Based on Chinese government media sources on explicitly nomadic populations, at least 1.8 million

¹² International Campaign for Tibet, 30 November 2021, 'China renews attacks on remaining Tibetan-language schools, <https://savetibet.org/china-renews-attacks-on-remaining-tibetan-language-schools/>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ CGTN, 16 October 2020, 'Tibet: How China's toughest battleground defeated absolute poverty?', <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-10-16/How-Tibet-eliminated-absolute-poverty-despite-harsh-climate--UDkSdO4J5S/index.html>.

¹⁵ Emily T. Yeh, Environmental Issues and conflict in Tibet, Hillman and Tuttle (eds.), 2016, 'Ethnic Conflict and Protest in Tibet and Xinjiang: Unrest in China's West', Columbia University Press, Page 154.

¹⁶ These policies have been rolled out under different names, such as the Grassland Law, Rangeland Household Responsibility System, Nomad Resettlement Project, Converting pastures to grassland, ecological migration project, and the comfortable housing project.



nomads have been settled into sedentary houses under various Chinese government policies.¹⁷

Under these relocation policies, nomads are coerced into settled homes, apparently intentionally misled by promises of an improved quality of life with subsidized housing, new job opportunities, and easy access to health and education services. When settled, nomads struggle in the new cash economy without their animals and ready access to water, meat and dairy products, and fuel sources. They become indebted to government housing loans, with no skills training or viable work opportunities. Nomads consequently become poorer in real terms. Tibetan nomads are forced to reconfigure their lifestyle habits, aspirations and beliefs with no assistance to manage the transition or sufficient income sources to fund new out-of-pocket expenses such as education, healthcare and food costs.¹⁸ In sum, the development policy that sought to improve their socio-economic position and health in fact reduces their quality of life. Nomad relocation also leads to the loss of local communities' knowledge in protecting wildlife and nature.

Employment policies

Despite economic development ostensibly distributing the benefits of wealth generation, the Han-dominated and Han defined labour market has made Tibetans linguistically educationally and culturally disadvantaged in the job market. Tibetans commonly face ethnic discrimination in the private sector, while the state sector recently phased out preferential policies for local Tibetans and Tibetan language requirements for local government jobs.¹⁹

Environmental conservation

China has established a system of protected nature parks and reserves that ban human activity and residence, including pastoral grazing or gathering medicinal herbs in relevant areas.²⁰ While this policy claims to improve environmental sustainability, it undermines biodiversity conservation, as the boundaries of nature reserves do not align with sites of

¹⁷ China Daily, 6 July 2012: 'Over 1 million Tibetan nomads choose settlement', http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-07/06/content_15555645.htm; Xinhua, 1 December 2012: 'Massive nomad settlement to protect "mother river"', <http://en.people.cn/90882/8041990.html>; China Daily, 6 July 2012: 'Over 1 million Tibetan nomads choose settlement', http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2012-07/06/content_15555645.htm; and Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, 5 December 2009, '青海3万多□牧民迁新居：“小□政“托起”大民生’[Ch. 'Qinghai san wan duo hu nong mu min qian xinju: "xiao caizheng 'tuoqi' da minsheng', 'More than 30,000 farmers and herdsmen in Qinghai moved to their new homes: microfinance support the people's livelihood], http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2009-12/05/content_1481036.htm; Human Rights Watch, 'They Say We Should Be Grateful', 2013, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/tibet0613webwcover_0.pdf, page 4; China Daily, 7 August 2015, 'Families moving into the modern era', http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/tibet50years/2015-08/07/content_21525294.htm.

¹⁸ Huatse Gyal, 2019, "'I am concerned with the future of my children": the project economy and shifting views of education in a Tibetan pastoral community', *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 1, pages 12-30.

¹⁹ Radio Free Asia, 14 March 2012, 'Language Policy Comes Under Scrutiny', <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/students-03142012213524.html>; Human Rights Watch, 30 July 2018, 'Illegal Organizations: China's crackdown on Tibetan social Groups', <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/07/30/illegal-organizations/chinas-crackdown-tibetan-social-groups>.

²⁰ See Art. 26 of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 1994, 'Regulations of the People's Republic of China on nature reserves', http://en.chinaculture.org/library/2008-01/07/content_21464_4.htm.



biodiversity. Furthermore, the nature reserve policy to ensure environmental sustainability hinders the economic status of Tibetan herders and nomads as it prohibits traditional economic activity.

10. Have international development and financial agencies taken into account cultural rights in sustainable development initiatives?

We are aware of a 2006 UK Department for International Development program, which successfully drew on local cultures to design successful bilingual teacher training programs.

The ‘Gannan Tibetan Bilingual Project’ was a bilingual teacher training project for Tibetan primary school teachers supported by the UK Department for International Development in China in collaboration with the Gansu Provincial Department of Education, as part of the Support to Universal Basic Education Project (SUBEP).²¹

The project aimed to develop bilingual education teacher training materials for teaching language arts and mathematics, and to train Tibetan teachers in Gansu Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures on sound modern bilingual teaching principles and methodologies following the participatory approach.²²

A baseline evaluation of the teaching methods at both primary and secondary schools revealed the need for teacher training on delivering quality and culturally appropriate bilingual education.²³ The researchers also observed a lack of instruction materials and learning resources, as well as use of outdated teaching methods.²⁴ The project worked with a team of Tibetans and external experts on traditional Tibetan and modern teaching methods to develop a sample lesson that “reflected the Tibetan culture aligned with the Chinese national curriculum and followed current research-based bilingual teaching practices while combining traditional Tibetan teaching methods”.²⁵

After a successful pilot eight-day primary teacher training program in Lanzhou city with 51 teachers, teachers provided positive feedback, noting the unique opportunity to have targeted Tibetan teacher training. Some teachers expressed enthusiasm having learned different ways to teach, but expressed concern for the lack of on-site trainers and supplementary Tibetan-language materials to support their teaching.²⁶

Gouleta, who was invited as an international consultant on the project emphasized the importance of grounding education in the local culture. She stressed, “**one of the most significant lessons learned is the importance of the minority culture and its human capital in the success of the project,**”²⁷ adding, “no new bilingual teaching methodology can be effective and applicable in another geopolitical and cultural context unless it ‘marries’ with

²¹ Eirini Gouleta, 2011, ‘A bilingual education professional development project for primary Tibetan teachers in China: the experience and lessons learned’, *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*.

²² Ibid., Gouleta, 2011, page 6.

²³ Ibid., Gouleta, page 9.

²⁴ Ibid., Gouleta, page 6.

²⁵ Ibid., Gouleta, page 12.

²⁶ Ibid., Gouleta, page 15-16.

²⁷ Ibid., Gouleta, page 17.



the traditions of the native population. **No new knowledge can be embraced unless the knowledge of the native culture is equally valued, respected, and capitalized upon”**.²⁸

Gouleta, in particular, cited their use of both research-based bilingual education methodology and traditional Tibetan methods to create a model of Tibetan bilingual education that would be relevant and useful to teachers and students.²⁹

11. Where cultural resources and creative capacities were leveraged in achieving the SDGs, what were in your experience the results, successes, weaknesses, or lessons learned?

The Tibetan teachers’ enthusiastic embrace of culturally respectful and informed bilingual teacher training materials and methods highlights the dearth of culturally appropriate teacher training and education materials, as well as the effectiveness of such methods. We know of other culturally Tibetan schools which seek to provide an education grounded in Tibetan language and culture. Although they have been successful in improving academic results, they have been closed or management has been reclaimed by the state, as spaces of cultural expression and cultivation are perceived as threats to state security.

ENDS

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²⁸ Ibid., Gouleta , page 17.

²⁹ Ibid., Gouleta , page 17.

