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**Report from a Study Mission to Canada for Senior Staff of the
Committee on Agriculture and Rural Affairs of the National People's
Congress of the People's Republic of China**

Canada-China Legislative Cooperation Project

September 3-24, 2005

In June 2005, the Parliamentary Centre held a seminar in Beijing with the Agriculture Committee of the National People's Congress to address a variety of legislative issues related to farmers' cooperatives and rural development. One of the concerns shown by the Chinese participants was how to adapt lessons learned from the Canadian legislative and policy-making experience to the practical needs of China's rural development. It was concluded that a follow-up study visit to Canada would complement the theoretical understanding with exposure to some practical examples of rural development initiatives in Canada.

From September 3-24, two staff managers of the Agriculture Committee of the NPC embarked on a three-week mission to a number of regions in Canada including Saskatoon, Montreal, Ottawa and Guelph. The focus of the visit was three-fold:

- the operation of Canadian cooperatives to pool together resources for collective benefits and their implications for legislation and policy
- shared responsibilities of federal and provincial governments in the domain of rural development and the dynamics and process of policy coordination among various jurisdictions/departments
- methods and mechanisms to engage representative organizations, particularly women's organizations, and individual citizens from rural areas in the policy-making process

While in Canada, the two delegates met with government agencies involved in the policy-making process in agriculture and rural development at both the federal and provincial levels. They exchanged experiences and views regarding a wide range of legislative and policy issues related to rural development, citizen engagement, gender equality and parliamentary committee work. Visits to various examples of farms and cooperatives were also arranged to offer visual perspectives on the impacts of laws and policies. The following is a synopsis of issues of discussions and findings from the study visit.

Overview of the Canadian Agricultural Policy Framework

Adopting laws and policies to support rural development has been a priority for the Agriculture Committee, particularly in the wake of China's recent WTO accession. The NPC Agriculture Committee have concerns about the implications of China's WTO commitments and are showing interest in identifying a latitude of viable policy options to assist the agricultural sector in the transition process.

The visit demonstrated the priorities in the recent reform of the Canadian Agriculture Policy Framework. Thomas Shenstone, Director General of the Policy Branch, presented five cornerstone elements of the new Agricultural Policy Framework, i.e. food safety, environment, science innovation, renewal and business risk management, which all aimed at supporting the sustained development of rural communities and farming sectors. His presentation noted that, in Canada, agriculture was identified in the Constitution as an area of shared jurisdiction and, hence, any agricultural legislation or policy at the federal level has to be negotiated with and approved by each province in order to become fully effective. The visit with the Policy Branch of Agriculture Canada provided lessons learned from the governance process to develop a coherent policy framework that reflected the mutual interests of the provincial and federal governments.

By focusing on the example of production insurance, Sheldon Friesen from the Production Insurance Branch presented a model in which the federal government, provinces and individual farmers partnered together to provide targeted and stable protection for a variety of production and asset losses. It was demonstrated that the success of the Canadian agricultural policy, particularly crop insurance, rest upon the partnership approach taken by the federal and provincial governments, particularly the cost-sharing formulas tailored to different scenarios of losses according to their severity, frequency and controllability. The feedback of the NPC staff showed that the participatory model should be taken into consideration when the China attempts to develop a safety network to protect the farming sectors against unforeseeable risks.

Policy Support and Coordination to Promote Rural Development

Rural development is another area where policy decisions are worked out jointly by the shared jurisdiction of the federal and provincial governments. The meeting with the Rural Secretariat of Agriculture Canada demonstrated some prominent policy measures and funding initiatives of the federal government aimed at providing research support and capacity-building assistance in rural areas. The Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development provided an overview of various focused programs at the provincial level to promote business, life, education and healthcare services at local communities, which echoed and complemented the efforts of the federal government. It was noted that the rural development framework of Ontario was built around four pillars: economic development, charitable asset, youth and leadership.

The NPC Committee staff were impressed with the Canadian approach to rural development that featured day-to-day cross-government coordination and strong community leadership. It was demonstrated that the Rural Secretariat played a central role at the federal level to provide leadership and coordination of rural affairs across various jurisdictions. It was underscored that this was only possible due to proactive communications and outreach, which contributed to the functionality of the multi-layered governance system in the domain of rural development. From the perspective of institutional development, it was learned that the Rural Secretariat relied upon a network of regional rural teams that were closely rooted in local communities across the country for policy advice, impact analysis and program management oversight. Various analytical and communications tools, such as Rural Lens, National Rural Framework, etc., were used to evaluate and align programs, policies and services in order to ensure their compatibility with the needs of local rural communities.

The NPC staff were interested in learning that strong partnership and local ownership were two hallmarks at all stages of the project development and management process, including research, consultation, resource development and investment contribution. Not only did voluntary organizations in rural areas take the lead in bidding on and executing development projects funded by the federal and provincial governments, the example of Rural Life Foundation in Ontario showed that community foundations actually provided funding for programs aimed at building the capacity of grass-root voluntary organizations to work more effectively to meet local demands.

Engagement of Rural Residents in the Policy Process

Discussions along this theme lent considerable attention to the Canadian experience in developing rural policy in consultation with impacted communities and residents. Particularly, the case of the National Rural Conference was studied in order to yield some practical insights into best practices in terms of promoting representation and effectiveness of public participation in rural policy-making. The Conference is held once two years and has been successful in bringing together rural citizens from across Canada to discuss rural issues, to make inputs in policy-making, to reflect rural view of the federal role and to look for solutions.

The NPC staff demonstrated a strong interest in acquiring practical techniques and tools applied in the process of planning and organizing consultation as well as the follow-up on consultation findings. In response, organizers of the NRC illustrated specific criteria for the selection of participants, topics and timing to ensure fair representation and meaningful participation. Some best practices were found suitable for application on a broader scale. For example, the nomination of participants in the NRC is accepted on a broad basis and the composition of the actual participants closely mirrors that of the rural population by region, gender, occupation, age, etc.

One of the key findings is that citizens who could put aside their immediate self-

interest and work for the common good should be involved and public participation should begin right from the design stage and then persist through every significant project milestone. The Canadian experience also alluded to the importance of orienting the agenda/content towards a constructive vision of the future, rather than focussing on issues and problems of the past. It was concluded that planning and evaluation tools that focused on outcomes as opposed to process should be used in order to measure achieved results.

In the course of consultation, the conference brought together officials from all government departments not only to expose them to the questions and concerns of citizens for immediate responses, but also to nurture ongoing linkages with citizens after the conference. The Rural Secretariat mentioned that an inclusive partnership with all relevant government departments will ensure that concrete actions could be taken in a coordinated manner to follow up with the issues, concerns or recommendations tabled at the conference.

It was argued that the citizen engagement was useful not only for informing policy-makers of the needs and interests of local communities, but also for getting messages out to individual citizens. It was believed that participants in the seminar would bring back to their local communities information and knowledge they acquired from the consultation process and that their successful participation would inspire, assure and motivate their peers to get involved. Tools such as newsletter and website have also helped to disseminate the findings from the conference and make public the actions taken by the government in response.

Incorporation of Gender Perspectives into Rural Development

Gender equality is designated as a cross-cutting theme for all activities of the CCLCP Project. Analyzing legislation and policies according to gender and poverty considerations involves concrete steps and processes to ensure that the needs and concerns of women are incorporated. A number of gender-related visits were organized as part of the study visit of the two senior researchers of the Agriculture Committee to Canada.

The meeting with the Farm Women's Bureau of the AAFC provided an overview of Canadian legal and institutional framework designed to ensure the integration of gender equality in rural policies and programs as well as recruitment decisions of the government. The NPC staff were familiarized with the roles and responsibilities of the Department of the Status of Women and the Farm Women's Bureau of AAFC to facilitate information linkages and policy consultation with farm women and farm women's organizations and to make gender inputs in cross-departmental work planning. The Chinese delegates were also exposed to some best practices of the Canadian government in improving women's representation and participation in departmental and industry review of agricultural and rural development policies and programs. Some examples of available avenues or tools were demonstrated, such as Minister's annual meeting with Canadian farm women leaders, information

clearinghouse for women farmers equipped with new communication technologies, research with gender lens, etc.

The delegates also had exposures to some successful examples of women organizations in Canada dedicated to representing the interests of women rural residents and improving their living conditions. For example, they visited the Union Culturelle des Franco-ontariennes and obtained a practical perspective on how a voluntary organization is structured, financed and managed on a daily basis to offer rural women and minorities sustained access to development opportunities. The overview of the cooperative program sponsored by the organization, which was aimed at facilitating the sales of art crafts made by women members, presented a viable model to improve the economic status of rural women while preserving cultural heritage in rural societies.

The feedback of the two delegates indicated that these activities demonstrated practical mechanisms and tools which can be used to incorporate the gender perspective into the agricultural and rural development policies and to engage farm women in the policy-making process. It was recognized that the gender perspective should continue to be threaded through future study missions in order to further improve the overall gender-sensitiveness of committee decisions and actions.

Impact Analysis of Cooperatives in Operation

The visit in Saskatoon and Montreal was facilitated by the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives at University of Saskatchewan and aimed at exposing the Agriculture Committee staff to the legislative and policy environment enabling the development of cooperatives in Canada. Specifically, the visit on cooperatives law was planned to provide support and assistance to the NPC Agriculture Committee in the following areas:

- 1) Internal governance and management systems of Farmer Cooperatives
- 2) The relationship between government and FCs
- 3) The creation of a legislative and macro-economic framework that promotes FC development as an instrument for rural development
- 4) The development of FCs in various regions and their experiences in developing and regulating FCs.

As part of the visit, the delegates met with officials from various cooperative in action and government agencies responsible for administering the cooperatives law. The program has provided the delegates with an enriched understanding of how Canadian farmers utilized various forms of shared resources in the production and marketing of their agricultural products, in obtaining credit, in accessing information, in funding research, in developing infrastructure and the rural economy, and in generally promoting their interests. It was observed that the collective action came through different organizational structures including farm organizations, cooperatives and other business enterprises and that, in many cases, producer collective action led to government enabling legislation that provided the

legal basis for formation of marketing, financial, research, and informational organizations and agencies.

The study of various cases revealed the dynamics of governance and consultation behind the legislative drafting process in order to ensure the enabling nature of the Cooperatives Act. Specifically, site visits to various examples of cooperatives were arranged to expose the delegation to the perspectives of Canadian cooperatives and their representative bodies on the impacts of the legislation on rural development and the roles of the government to engage impacted communities in the legislative process. This increased the awareness and skill of the Chinese legislative staff to take into considerations inputs from civil society organizations and impacted farmers when developing the legal framework for farmers' cooperatives.

It is worth noting that the visit of the NPC participants in Saskatoon and Montreal were part of a bigger study mission consisting of members of the legislative taskforce on the Cooperatives Law from other departments, including the Agriculture Ministry, Development Research Centre of the State Council and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Since the NPC participants were able to connect and interact with the other members of the legislative taskforce during the visit, knowledge and findings from the visit would have a chance to shape the consensus of the whole group and translate into concrete policy outcomes.

Parliamentary Exchanges on the Committee Process

The NPC Agriculture Committee has expressed persistent interest in building linkages with the Canadian Agriculture Committee of the House of Commons on various occasions. During the mission in September, senior staff of the Chinese NPC Agriculture Committee met with their counterparts from the Agriculture Committee of Canadian Parliament and exchanged experiences in supporting the legislative drafting and review process of their committees. Through the discussions, the Chinese delegates acquired a variety of practical tools, templates and examples, such as the guidelines for preparing agenda for a Committee meeting, templates for reporting on findings from the legislative review at the Committee, etc. They indicated that these tools would be immanently helpful for the staff of the NPC Committee in improving the effectiveness of their procedural and research support to the Committee.