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Rural governance calls for enhanced youth role

EDITOR'S NOTE

The concept of "youth" in a modern sense took shape roughly in the 1770s as industrialization and modernization began to advance. The Industrial Revolution instigated a wave of rural-urban migration. Youth thronged to cities and gained attention because of their participation in social issues. As modernization proceeded, people no longer considered youth to be the initiators of social issues. Instead, they placed greater emphasis on the group's positive role in social development.

Things are now different in China. Inadequate youth participation is impeding the development of Chinese rural areas. Considering the initiative to implement comprehensive rural vitalization, policymakers are obliged to incentivize rural youth to return home and urban youth to move to villages.

By SHAN LIQING

In traditional society, youth and children are seen as entering a stage of "social becoming." They need to maintain persistent effort, learning to understand society before being considered "social beings." Seniors therefore dominate rural politics while youth between the ages of 20 and 30 cannot join the rural governance networks.

However, modern technology advances in leaps and bounds. Society itself is evolving at a fast speed. The younger generation is increasingly exerting cultural influence on its elders, where seniors learn from youth how to use smartphones and other technological devices. Also, children often circulate new concepts, such as awareness of environmental protection, to their parents. Senior-dominated rural politics can no longer accommodate social development. Youth participation is the crucial approach which opens new opportunities for rural governance.

Proactive role in villages

China has been stressing the integrated development of primary, secondary, and tertiary industries in rural areas. Rural development demands young talent with abundant knowledge and skills. Youth have a big role to play in many new business patterns, such as rural e-commerce and online live-streaming. Returning to the rural area doesn't mean they have to inherit the elder generations' traditional farming production



Youth delegates visit agricultural product base in Zhongyang Village, Yongtai County in Fujian Province. Jiang Kehong/XINHUA

methods. Youth can accelerate rural industrial reforms due to their knowledge about modern technology and keen grasp of social demands. In a typical case from the rural e-commerce sector, youth and women account for 85% and 66% respectively among entrepreneurs who sell peony paintings online, based in Pingle Town, Luoyang City, Henan Province. E-commerce has promoted other industries in villages, created new jobs, and upgraded development potential.

In the course of modernization, many countries and regions have encountered problems such as "empty" villages and aging rural people. People began to reflect on urban-rural relations and circumvent policies and practices for rural vitalization, which underscores the role of young talent. It demonstrates the need for a reinvention of rural governance. Traditional rural governance is largely reliant on particular social groups, such as the gentry, and unofficial mechanisms such as local rules and regulations valid for all villagers.

In the current governance edifice, village committees are crucial organizations. However, due to rural flight and population aging, many can't find successors ready to take over, and some locations still uphold the tradition of senior governance. Village elections serve as the most important institutional channel for young people to participate in rural governance. National policies are also reinforcing the training of the talent reserves for village-level organizations.

Nostalgia

To encourage youth to come back to villages, apart from

policies that can improve employment and entrepreneurial environments, young people's internal stimulus is paramount. In the new era, homesickness lays the emotional bedrock for youth to return and work in the countryside, and the possibility becomes a connection linking rural and urban areas. Homesickness encapsulates rural youth's warm memories about their hometowns and childhood. Nostalgia captures urban youth's imagination about rural life. Developed countries saw a massive return to the countryside when their industrialization and urbanization had progressed to a mature stage. Urban citizens flocked to satiate nostalgia, food cravings, and traditions in rural areas, motivating villages with rich culture and natural endowments to foster tourism and guest house service. Urban middle-income groups go to the countryside to find a new lifestyle as they become the mainstay of rural tourism.

Nostalgia and ideals incentivize young entrepreneurs to overcome difficult rural conditions so that they can participate in rural vitalization and devote themselves to rural development. More youth have started to transform yearning for the countryside into entrepreneurial practices. Apart from accommodation and e-commerce, their businesses innovate in fields such as intangible cultural heritage and elderly care services. Such efforts have helped expand business formats and raise social service supplies in rural areas.

However, young entrepreneurs don't perform well in terms of sector distribution and as a percentage of all start-ups. They have yet to form a replicable model. Meanwhile, individual successes

have yet to bolster rural development. Identifying young people's homesickness and nostalgia and supporting them with policies is an issue which deserves exploratory efforts.

In reality, a paradox exists in society. Rural life fills people's idyllic imagination, but rural youth are still "escaping" to the cities. In social values, cities represent the future and development, while villages represent nostalgia and imagination. The imagined village life further pushes youth toward cities because they want to embrace the future. This social concept demonstrates the real rural-urban divide and the sluggishness of rural values. Meanwhile, we need to rethink rural education. Many scholars are wary of an urban orientation in education, which depreciates the value of rural society by considering it a secondary social system. Therefore, they advocate for strengthening rural education to reconstruct a more balanced urban-rural discourse.

Since the mid-1990s, the rapid progress of abolishing and merging rural primary and secondary schools also affected rural children's experience. For the rural children who go to kindergarten in towns or start boarding life since primary school, their daily lives are confined to schools. Regarding time and space, they are blocked from village communities. When these children grow into young adults, they may not be able to develop an intense rural identity. It will become tougher to reach their hearts and motivate them to return to villages.

Room for growth

In recent years, there has been continuous improvement in the

rural developmental environment. Villages have attracted youth to return and have seen some successful cases. To increase attractiveness to youth, the most crucial factor is career development space. The task centers on understanding the economic demands and enacting relevant policies. A shortfall of excellent job opportunities is a major reason for the failure in encouraging youth to stay in villages. In fact, in the context of rural sector crossover, some jobs can hardly attract youths despite urgent needs and competitive salaries.

In some villages with rich ecological resources, new industries, such as guesthouse services, have created new jobs, such as guesthouse managers and event planners. However, there is still a divide between employment demand and supply. Take Chenjiapu Village in Songyang County, Zhejiang Province, for example: the local guesthouse industry finds it difficult to sustain good housekeepers. Also, qualified young laborers frequently shift jobs. The main reason is not the salary, but the resistance from the youth's families and confusion about possibilities for future development.

Professional study opportunities and difficulties in personal life can also prevent young people from staying in rural areas with ease. For example, village doctors and village teachers often seek ways to leave after their prescribed period of service. Comparatively, cities can provide individuals with a broader platform for learning and career development. Despite the increase in rural doctors and teachers' incomes, young people still consider space for career growth to be more important. Villages' attractiveness also reduces due to rural living conditions, the youth's marriage and relationship plans, children's education, and other factors.

Multiple supporting policies should highlight economic dimensions and future development opportunities. Apart from entrepreneurship and training, policymakers should also remove barriers between urban and rural areas. For youth serving the countryside, a multi-dimensional reward policy should be implemented. In addition to regular economic subsidies, it behooves us to establish a prestige mechanism so that youth gain value recognition.

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