

governance from below, not from Beijing

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central and provincial-level officials visit reform project in Huzhou, Zhejiang

Beijing increasingly views local experiments as means to improve governance

Localities trialling solutions without seeking Beijing's formal approval might be granted leeway after all

Local experiments in governance and reform received a boost in recent weeks when Beijing endorsed variety, at least for now.

Party and government officials insist central policy goals have not changed, and 2019 is a crucial year for achieving them. What is new is the urgency with which challenges to reform are conveyed. Echoing Xi's talk of [black swans and grey rhinos](#), the Party's flagship newspaper People's Daily [amplified the sense of danger](#) and called on cadres to 'enhance their understanding of the need for concern'.

Rather than doubling down on centralisation, Beijing is signaling a willingness to consider local experiments as acceptable ways to improve governance, even when they might depart from the overall design. Xi Jinping [习近平](#) CCP General Secretary noted at the [sixth meeting of the Central Commission for Comprehensively Deepening Reform](#) on 23 Jan 2019 that a one-size-fits-all approach cannot be taken, arguing that reform plans should be 'adjusted to local conditions and refined layer-by-layer.'

That acknowledgement will be particularly welcome in localities that are already trialling different solutions without always asking Beijing for formal approval. For instance, a Hunan city dealt with staff shortages by [reconfiguring urban areas into grids](#) and taking on auxiliary police officers. One Sichuan county [found its problem at the other extreme and created new position categories](#) upon discovering that over 11,000 Party members were sitting idle, with backgrounds that did not match job openings. And at the township level, a local government decided to [recruit inspectors from adjoining townships](#) to improve management of cadres. Faced with particularly challenging socio-economic issues, Gansu provincial government is [seeking suggestions from outside experts and think tanks](#).

In the mainly agricultural town of Gaohuang, Anhui, local clans had monopolised power, land disputes were common, and the law was being largely ignored. The local police chief enlisted members of prominent families as coordinators and [formed dispute mediation teams](#) made up of respected community members. District-level political and legal

many issues troubling localities lie less in corruption and more in day-to-day governance

Beijing is not deaf to local concerns and solutions

challenge is for local governments to assure Beijing that experiments are not efforts to thwart the centre

institutions are trialling a similar initiative in Fuzhou to reduce problems that might have escalated from unattended petitions. A municipal level Discipline and Inspection Commission in Anhui cleared 166 cadres accused of taking undue risks in policy experiments of wrongdoing—another departure from the tightening-and-toughening line out of Beijing.

These experiments clearly differ in the problems they address and the methods applied. What they have in common is their localised nature, suggesting that the problems afflicting localities lie less in corruption than run-of-the-mill concerns like lack of resources, staff shortfalls, training, confidence in what constitutes bold moves and what Beijing may construe as overstepping. In short, changes in the building blocks of day-to-day governance.

A recent report published in *People's Daily* shows Beijing is not deaf to these concerns or the local remedies offered up. Acknowledging low morale and a reluctance to take initiative, the report, a survey of 3,400 cadres in one locality, suggests solutions focused on assuaging their worries, improving their capabilities and reforming institutional mechanisms to offer them more support and clearer boundaries for behaviour.

Another *People's Daily* article cites experts who argue the assumption that governance is only about government is creating problems instead of solving them. Officials working in cities find too many rules to implement, many of them unsuited to local conditions. Better governance, on this view, does not lie in more centralisation but in differentiated models that encourage citizen participation and enlist other parties such as social organisations and other enterprises to help out with policy.

Cadres and bureaucrats alike will need the help. Despite more central oversight and campaigns, the Minister of Public Security acknowledges mafia groups are becoming increasingly sophisticated adversaries. A ministry dedicated to veterans was set up in the March 2018 government restructure: the centre continues to promise better treatment, yet protests by retired servicemen have been known to turn violent. Some local officials seem unable or unwilling to provide basic services to residents, according to their superiors. It is all well and good for Beijing to insist that cadres reach out to the grassroots; but when there's little to offer residents save new slogans and old sympathy, local officials will be hard-pressed to govern effectively.

Thus far, the vast majority of these trials are administrative and largely technical in nature. The challenge for local officials will be convincing Beijing that these experiments are not efforts to thwart central directives, but rather provide new ideas about realising better governance. Indeed, these experiments might well be what the times demand, both to carry out Beijing's policies and prevent opposition to them from taking root. But central leaders must eventually decide which initiatives are worth expanding, and which should be abandoned, perhaps because they allow too much local autonomy. How local officials react to those choices will tell us a great deal about where governance from below is headed next.

what are officials saying?

Wang Wentao 王文涛

Heilongjiang governor



Typically, local officials and Party cadres are dictatorial, want to do everything themselves, and prefer to operate in an opaque environment. But that approach breeds rent-seeking, making it difficult for investors to 'deal with things and find people to do things'. Efforts to simplify and decentralise government, as well as create an efficient and transparent authority, should continue. Officials need to take the rule of law as a basic way of thinking and working, so that investors can rest assured that business is welcomed and protected.

Li Xianqiao 李先桥

Hubei province Hanchuan Municipal Committee secretary



Given cadres are the backbone of the Party's cause, more attention must be paid to their mental well-being. The current challenges of contradiction and risk are unprecedented and cadres face enormous pressure. Guide cadres to maintain a positive mental state, support them in daring to experiment, educate them to correctly handle the relationship between compliance and responsibility and remind them that empty talk misleads the country, while practical work rejuvenates it.

Shu Xiaoqin 舒晓琴

State Bureau of Letters and Visits director



Leading cadres at all levels should regard petitions and visits as barometers reflecting social conditions and public opinion. In the new era, social contradictions have been transformed, and the work of letters-and-visits faces new challenges. Combine the Party's mass work with big data and artificial intelligence to provide more convenient, efficient and humane services for the masses. Party organisations, as well as urban and rural community groups at the grassroots, should mobilise residents to take part in the effort as well.

24 Jan 2019	Xi says that 'one-size-fits-all' approach to reform cannot be taken at the Central Commission for Comprehensively Deepening Reform's 6th meeting
22 Jan 2019	Xi convenes provincial and ministerial-level cadres to convey immediacy of challenges facing the Party and government
21 Jan 2019	Ministry of Justice commends individuals and groups that launched mediation pilots and adhered to the 'Maple Bridge Experience'
21 Jan 2019	Xi addresses provincial and ministerial cadres on systemic risks
20 Jan 2019	Anhui county assures cadres of right to experiment
15-16 Jan 2019	Central Political and Legal Work Conference calls for modernising social governance
11 Jan 2019	Tibet Party Secretary notes inadequacies in local governance
26 Dec 2018	Ministry of Civil Affairs and six other agencies require village and urban communities to have their own self-governance compact by 2020
20 Dec 2018	Sichuan county creates posts for unassigned Party members
17 Dec 2018	Hunan city survey finds cadres need better institutional and psychological support
26 Nov 2018	State Council praises some local government practices urging others to learn from those examples
22 Oct 2018	People's Daily commentary explicitly links anti-mafia campaign to improving grassroots governance
31 Aug 2018	commentary argues that grid governance may not work in all localities
21 Jun 2018	People's Daily presents a discussion outlining new models for social governance