Chinese Central Government Intervention in Local Policy Capacity Building: When and Why*

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Abstract

A key feature of Chinese governance is the strong and strategic engagement of a very powerful central government in local policy implementation capacity building. Employing data from local collaborative cross-jurisdictional infrastructure projects, this research develops a theoretical explanation for a key question regarding the Chinese governance model: under what policy circumstances does the central government engage in local policy implementation capacity building? The results reveal that a local policy implementation obstacle becomes a salient

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candidate for central intervention when local political disputes accumulate to indicate a significant outcome for the engagement. This insight, through further testing and refinement, can be used to develop a comprehensive explanation of the Chinese government's capacity building process for policy implementation.

Much understanding of Chinese governance stresses the strategic planning process that guides development, its pragmatism and experimentalism in policy implementation, and meritocracy in leadership selection.[1] This research argues that another key component, highly distinctive from many Western contexts, is the central government's mobilizing ability to address emerging local implementation obstacles in non-strategic policy areas that normally would not get the central government's policy attention. This research dissects the collaborative local infrastructure policy to illustrate when and why central government steps in to help local governments develop policy implementation capacity. Indeed, the central government's strong engagement in local policy plays a key role in China's governing practices, ranging from local economic development to technology innovation and development, environmental protection, and pandemic control. Therefore, understanding when and why central government engages in local policy implementation capacity building is critical to understanding Chinese governance.

Despite this distinctive characteristic of Chinese governance, little is known about when the central government is engaged in local governing capacity building. It is tempting to say that central government steps in whenever local government cannot resolve an issue, but it is simply untrue. A local implementation deadlock does not necessarily bring in central intervention. Indeed, as suggested by Wang and Xu,[2] and evidence below shows, most local implementation deadlocks do not lead to central government involvement. On this point, few studies answer the following questions: What are the policy circumstances under which the central government engages in capacity building for local policy implementation (reasons)? How does such engagement occur (strategies)? What does this engagement lead to (outcomes)? Addressing these questions constitutes a basis for a policy implementation theory in China. This research focuses on the first question.

This research examines local collaborative projects between Hong Kong and mainland China to explore how central intervention works.