

## **Experiences in Cross-Boundary Cooperation and Multi-level Governance for Sustainable Development in Urbanizing China: a Case Study of Chengdu-Mianyang-Deyang Intergovernmental Cooperation and Coordination Planning**

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### **Introduction**

Under the effects of globalization, regionalization and integration, China has shifted the urban strategy from the “large” and “extra-large” monopolized development to the strength of regional cooperation and collaboration as the developmental path. The restatement of the importance of regional cooperation has become a national trend of urban and regional strategy. Regional cooperation has turned authority over policymaking from local level states up to provincial and national institutions. Moreover, regional integration has become a political toolkit to gain more preferential policies and profits from central government towards sustainability for local development. Planning, as a significant tool of public policy, has been used widely in the promotion of regional cooperation and collaboration. Under the influence of decentralization, different levels of urban governance have been formed towards urban sustainability. As a consequence, multi-level governance (MLG) has been created towards different levels of the decision-making process in urbanizing China.

Since the early 2000s, there has been a dramatic emergence of interests in regional planning in mainland China. Many planning practitioners, public policy-makers, academics and business groups have come to see regional strategies and cooperation as essential in dealing with cross-boundary problems related to environmental protection, industrial development, and promotion of quality of life. The central government has launched regional initiatives through a top-down approach in areas such as the Pearl-River-Delta, Yangtze-River-Delta Jing-Jin-Ji Metropolitan Area, Guangzhou-Foshan-Zaoqing Metropolitan Area, and Changsha-Zhuzhou-Xiangtan Metropolitan Area. Scholars in both North America and the United Kingdom have noted the resurgence of a “new regionalism.” However, this new movement has seldom been defined or analyzed in urbanizing China. Although attention has been paid to the strong implications for regional planning and design in coastal areas of China, limited attention is paid to the regional planning approach in western part of China. The cooperation planning through the top-down approach from the central government has been widely criticized by the academics, politicians, planners, activists and public policy practitioners (Yang, 2006). It is argued that only the local governments at the city level are

qualified to do the regional planning work with the neighboring regions, given their knowledge of the real needs of the city and regions. Although the intergovernmental cooperation between different levels of governments is often hard to achieve, it is important for urban and regional planners to research how to establish the cooperation platforms for different levels of government to coordinate cross-boundary matters related to infrastructure, transportation, economic development and public facilities. In order to conduct the research of regional cooperation experiences in urbanizing China, the paper adopts the case study of Chengdu-Mianyang-Deyang Intergovernmental Cooperation and Coordination Planning (CMDICCP) to investigate the emerging MLG pattern in the area and identify the cross-boundary relationship between Chengdu, Deyang and Mianyang towards sustainability. In this paper, two aspects of theories will be mentioned, namely regional studies and multi-level government, which will be used to reflect the methods adopted by the planners to conduct the planning projects. The project is still undergoing, thus this paper does not seek to provide a detailed account of cross-boundary cooperation and coordination in the project. Instead, it offers some experiences of cross-boundary planning and analyzes the MLG pattern in urbanizing China.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Regional Studies***

The theory of regional studies has been widely used in planning projects to analyze the regional coordination needs of the three cities, Chengdu, Deyang and Mianyang. A series of new concepts have emerged to describe the formation of cities and regions in both the developed and developing world under the impact of globalization (Sassen, 2002, 2005; Scott et al., 2001). These scholars pose the following questions: “How do regions grow?” “Why do some regions grow more rapidly than others?” “What are differences in levels of economic development across regions?” “What political regulations could be adopted to strength regional development?” As a result of these questions, various theories have emerged to analyze regional development, such as the Growth Pole Theory (Perroux, 1970), Core-Periphery Theory (Friedmann, 1966), and Location Theory (Christaller, 1966), etc. These Western theories have influenced China’s urban planning framework in conducting regional analysis. The theory of regional studies provides a good account of method to analyze the regional problems and difficulties in the CMDICCP project.

### ***MLG Studies***

The second aspect of the theory comes from the “MLG paradigm” which has been applied to the case of European Union governance without a detailed account of the evolution of the comprehensive theory. There are two considerations to choose the theory to analyze the

cooperation between the Chengdu, Deyang and Mianyang regions. Firstly, as stated by the scholar, “MLG involves a shift from a hierarchical/vertical to a nonhierarchical/horizontal system of political negotiation, or ‘networked polity’” (Christiansen, 1996; Shen, 2004, p. 532). In addition, multi-level governance is termed as “a negotiated order rather than an order defined by a formalized legal framework” (Peters and Pierre, 2004, p. 81). The cooperation of CMD area has focused on the political negotiation rather than the top-down regulation. Planners place a higher value on a combination of strong social networks and supportive governance arrangements rather than on the spatial and technical divisions of labor in the cross-boundary area of the Chengdu, Deyang and Mianyang regions. Secondly, multi-level governance model has been used to explain the interactions among the different levels of governments and stakeholders in the southern part of China, whereas seldom attention has been paid to the western part of China. The growing attention paid to Sichuan due to the post-earthquake construction has made the cooperation in this region much more complicated. The cooperation initiated from the local government themselves has made the cooperation harder to put forward.

### ***Scholarly Significances***

The theory of regional studies has two implications. First, although the project use the theory of regional studies to analyze the different levels of the needs of regional development of the three cities, the capability and availability of the theories is questionable to urban planners in China. The western theory on regional studies hold great promise explaining regional development issues as “technique basis” in China. It is worth noting that the theories should be evaluated in a broader context.

Secondly, the MLG concept has been championed by scholars to examine the changing pattern of governance in identifying the cross-border issues in Hong Kong-Guangdong region (Hooghe and Marks, 2001, 2003; Marks and Hooghe, 2004; Yang, 2005). However, there is no literature analyzing the model applied in studying the cross-boundary cooperation in the less developed area of China. In order to fill the theoretical gap and better understand the complexities of the cooperation in CMD area, the research adopts the model as an analytical framework in the project.

### **Methodology**

The research adopts both quantitative and qualitative methods to probe into the different impacts of multi-level governance of the CMDICC planning project. The research group interviewed a series of public policy-makers at county level, prefecture-city level and provincial-level. The following questions were asked: How is the multi-level governance of

intergovernmental planning in China? How does the multi-level governance make influence on the planning in China towards sustainability? What difficulties and problems the planners face in further improving the intergovernmental cooperation and collaboration? The research group got the first hand data through the intensive interviews, meetings and seminars from Chengdu, Mianyang, Deyang, Qingbaijiang District, Mianzhu, Luojiang, and Anxian. The second hand of data comes from the published data collected from the Statistical Yearbook and internal and external documents.

## Research Findings

### ***Multilevel Governance in CMD cross-boundary Region***

The CMD area is not an administrative region, but originates from the concept of economic geography instead. Geographically, Chengdu lies in the center area of Sichuan Province, and Deyang lies to the north to Chengdu and Mianyang lies to the north to Deyang (Figure 1). The project covers the whole municipal area of Chengdu, Deyang and Mianyang. Chengdu is the capital city of Sichuan whereas Deyang and Mianyang are prefectural-level cities of Sichuan.

Different from other regional planning issued and phased by the central or provincial government, the CMD does not have a governing authority. Other regional planning areas in China have coordinators from the central government or provincial-level authorities. Existing intergovernmental communications in the region have been conducted between the three cities themselves, so the urban planners act as coordinators.

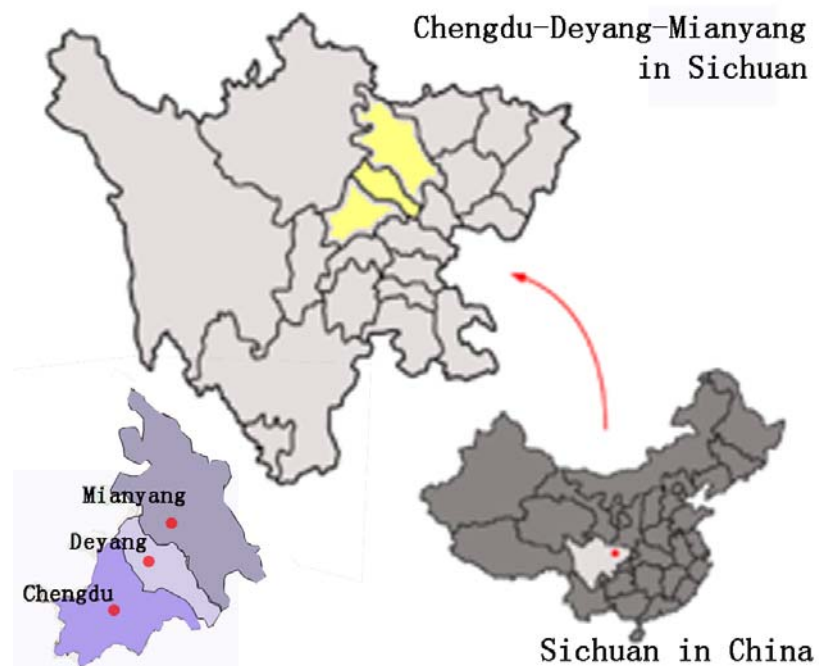


Figure 1: Geographical Location of CMDICCP  
Sources: Author

With respect to the administrative divisions, there is no municipality directly under the jurisdiction of central government. The CMD area includes one vice-provincial municipality

under the jurisdiction of the central government and Sichuan Provincial governments (Chengdu), two prefecture-level municipalities (Mianyang and Deyang) and 14 counties, eight county-level cities, and 12 city districts and one National Hi-Tech Industrial Development Zone in total. These are ranked at the same administrative level as county-level cities, counties and city districts (Figure 2). Figure 2 illustrates the administrative structure of CMD area. Since 2000s, large scale of administration annexations and transformations of regional governance have occurred in the coastal area of China, which attribute to the emergence of a series of regional and urban planning projects (Zhang and Wu, 2006). Some large and extra-large cities have been fascinated with the annexation of more county-level neighboring cities under the jurisdiction of other small- and mid-sized cities. The administrative structure of the area identifies that the significant role of Chengdu is self-evident. The imbalance administrative rights of each city lead to the inequality of the regional development.

Although the three cities have an equal position in the CMDICC planning projects, regional cooperation and coordination have proven more difficult than expected due to the unequal level of the regional economic and various levels of local governments with their individual development goals and strategies.

In the first place, the geographical location and natural resources of each city make the needs of regional cooperation in environmental protection and resources distribution diversified. The governors in each city identified that Deyang suffers from the environmental pollution raised by Chengdu and Mianyang. Moreover the geographical location of Chengdu plays a vital role in the control and management of water quality for the whole area.

In the second place, the economic development in the three regions is at different levels. The economic development growth of Chengdu is more significant than that of Deyang and Mianyang. The industrial growth of the three cities also suggests that Chengdu has developed more rapidly than Mianyang and Deyang (Table 1).

Table 1: Economic index of CMD area

|          | 2008       | Total           |          | 2009    | Fiscal |
|----------|------------|-----------------|----------|---------|--------|
|          | Population | Total Area      |          | Revenue |        |
| Unit     | Million    | km <sup>2</sup> | 2009 GDP | Billion |        |
| Chengdu  | 11.25      | 12390           | 450.26   | 99.7    |        |
| Deyang   | 3.88       | 5818            | 78       | 12.96   |        |
| Mianyang | 5.41       | 20249           | 82.02    | 8.8     |        |

Sources:

<http://www.baidu.com/s?bs=2009+%B2%C6%D5%FE%CA%D5%C8%EB+%C3%E0%D1%F4&f=8&>

*wd=2009+%B2%C6%D5%FE%CA%D5%C8%EB+%B5%C2%D1%F4 (accessed on June 1 2010)*

In the third place, the inequality regional development has been to some extent related to the existing levels of governance in the region. Although there is no municipal directly controlled by the central government, the development goals and strategies are highly related to the central government's interests, provincial level regulation, and other stakeholders' interests.

As a result of the transition of the national development strategy phased at different stages from the Third-Front Strategy initiated in 1970s to Western Development Strategy in 1999 to Post-Earthquake Reconstruction Programme in 2008 these goals and strategies bring about unprecedented opportunities towards local development. Multiple interest groups make great influences on the formation of each city, ranging from the central government to local government, from the market to state regulation, and from the commercial private parties to the social activists.

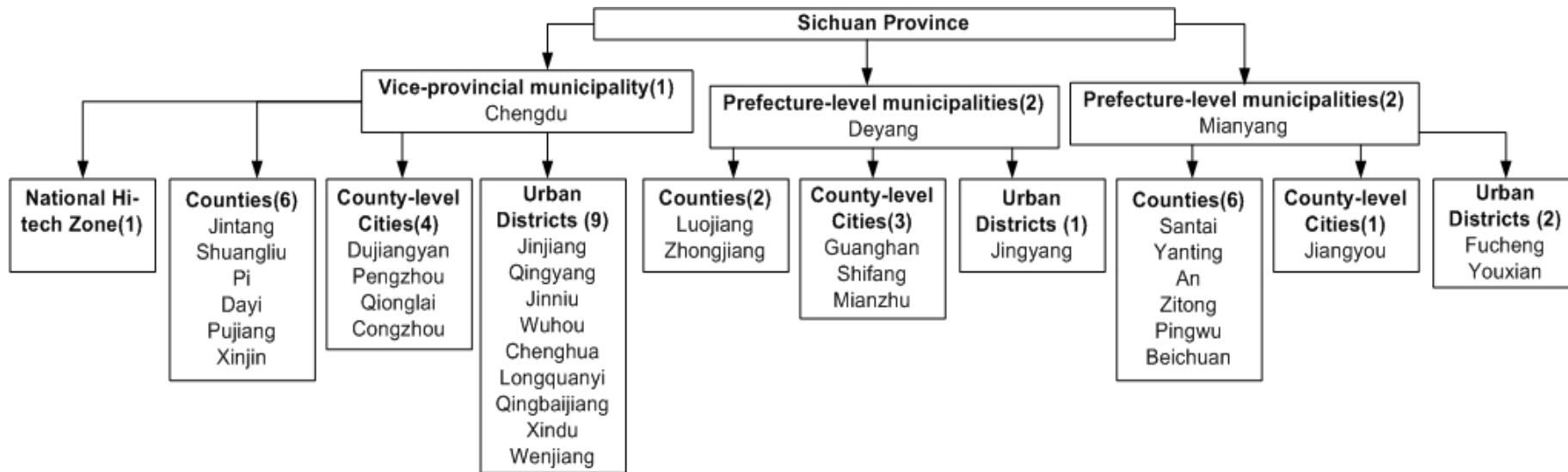


Figure 2 Administrative hierarchy in CMD region, 2010

Sources: compiled by the author.

Notes: numbers in brackets refer to the corresponding number of governments in each category of the CMD cross-boundary region.

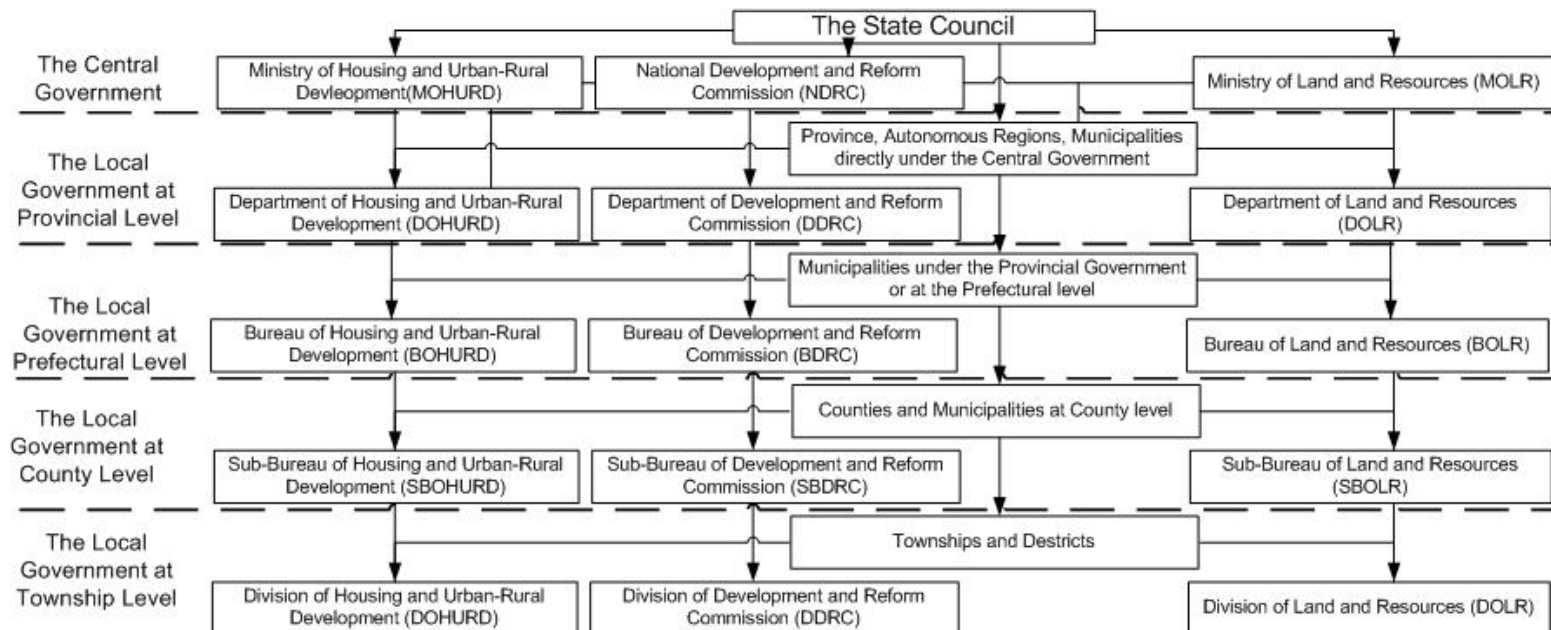


Figure 3 Planning hierarchy in China

Sources: Revised from Xu, 1999

In face of the difficulties mentioned above, it is no doubt that it will be a tough task for the urban planners to conduct the projects to improve further intergovernmental cooperation. So how could the planning results make contribute to the intergovernmental cooperation? And what could urban planners do to improve the cross-boundary urban coordination? What experiences we could learn from Chinese planning? In order to fully understand the issues, the administrative right of the planning hierarchy is analyzed.

### ***Administrative Rights of the Planning-related Departments***

It is self-evident that the planning results and impacts are highly related to the administrative rights held by agencies that implement and regulate the planning proposed by the local governments. Based on the Chinese administrative system, the government imposes planning phases with various aims and objectives at different stages. The regional planning could be phased by central government, provincial government and local government dealing with different levels of cross boundary problems.

Figure 3 illustrates the political administration hierarchy of the different departments which responsible for the related planning implementation with their own administrative rights. Regional planning is spread out in China such that strategies can also be phased by the Ministry of Housing and Urban and Regional Development (MOHURD), National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) with specific considerations. The regional planning implemented by MOHURD, formerly known as the Ministry of Construction pays more attention to the spatial governance of both urban and rural areas.

### ***CMD Intergovernmental Planning Political Administrative Status***

The CMDICCP is authorized by the department of Housing and Urban and Regional Development (MOHURD) in Chengdu, Deyang and Mianyang. So the implementation and management of the joint work has to abide with the requirement of planning at higher levels. According to “Urban and Rural Planning Act” initiated in 2007, the CMDICCP is a non-legal planning document, which could be served as public policy reference for lower levels of planning agencies. Figure 4 proposes the official legal status of CMDICCP in the planning system. It states that the CMDICCP has both strengths and limitations. On one side, it provides a cross-boundary platform for different levels of stakeholders to discuss the cross-boundary issues. On the other hand, it is still unclear what progress it could make to put forward cross-boundary spatial management due to its non-legal status. It is no doubt that it acts as an experimental planning movement in urbanizing China towards sustainability.



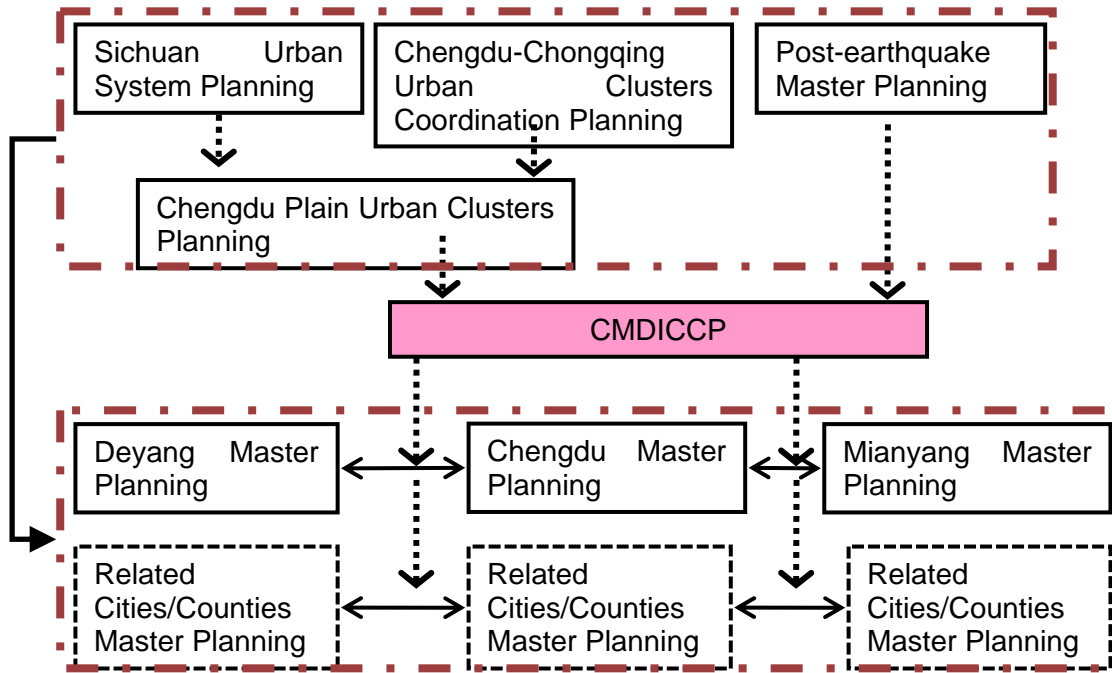


Figure 4: Legal Status of CMDICCP in the Planning System of CMD Area

Sources: Author

**Problems**

Through personal interviews and meetings with local residents and governors, the cross-boundary problems have been listed in Table 2. Generally speaking, the cross-boundary problems include inappropriate cross-boundary urban spatial structure, cross-boundary infrastructure and transportation facility, and cross-boundary environmental pollution.

Table 2 Major problems of CMDICCP

|                       | Spatial Structure  | Industrial Distribution                 | Environmental Protection  | Transportation   | Infrastructure                                       |
|-----------------------|--|---|---|--|--|
| Regional Level        | ◆ Spatial Structure Contradiction                            | ◆ Industrial Distribution Contradiction | ◆ Water resources protection<br>◆ Environmental protection  | ◆ CMD transportation connection                              | ◆ Cross-boundary Infrastructure                      |
| Prefecture-city Level | ◆ Spatial Development Structure                              | ◆ Industrial competition                | ◆ Water resources protection<br>◆ Environmental protection  | ◆ Chengdu -Deyang Connection<br>◆ Deyang-Mianyang Connection | ◆ Cross-boundary energy transition                   |
| Inter-county Level    | ◆ Contradiction between industrial area and residential area | ◆ Industrial competition                | ◆ Qingbaijiang and Guanghan: Environmental protection<br>◆ Anxian and Mianzhu: Environmental protection<br>◆ Jintang and Guanghan: Water resources protection | ◆ Qingbaijiang and Jintang<br>◆ Guanghan and Shifang         | ◆ Qingbaijiang and Jintang<br>◆ Guanghan and Shifang |
| Intra-County Level    | ◆ Cross-boundary township management                         | ◆ Cross-boundary cooperation            | ◆ Cross-boundary environmental protection   | ◆ Cross-boundary transportation connection                   | ◆ Cross-boundary infrastructure connection           |

Sources: Author

### Goals

Although there are administrative barriers rooted in the administrative rights of the planning department, the planning department also intends to make progress in dealing with cross-boundary issues. The first is the identification of the cross-boundary spatial areas with the strategic significances and spatial guidelines for regulation. For instance, the planning department proposed three cross-boundary zones for further research to conduct various levels of regulations regional governance. Secondly, the planning department pays attention to the cross-boundary infrastructure and transportation. For instance, Chengdu intends to build a subway system and regional rail system in response to competition from other large cities in Southern China, such as Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and even Chongqing. The Chengdu government proposed expanding its boundary to the hinterlands, so it is necessary to research the possibilities and availability for connecting the existing Chengdu railway to

Deyang and Mianyang. Moreover, the competition of water resources in the three cities is a critical problem. Thus, the planning department has proposed a framework for cross-boundary resources and environment protection and regulation.

### ***Proposed MLG Cases in the CMD Cross-boundary Region***

As discussed above, no regional institution is directly in charge of the coordination of the development and planning of the region and the cross-boundary regional affairs. Moreover, the administrative rights of the planning departments rely upon the regulation and distribution of the resources of the region.

Some of the significant cross-boundary issues can be solved if the provincial government becomes more involved as a coordinator. To some extent, the provincial government could serve as an authority for cross-boundary governance of the CMD region, which will further facilitate integration. Moreover, the influence of the planning of the projects could result in the creation of intergovernmental cooperation areas, which mostly relies upon the collaboration between the three different cities in the region. The proposed spatial area of intergovernmental cooperation can be called the “Chengde New Zone.” (Figure 5)

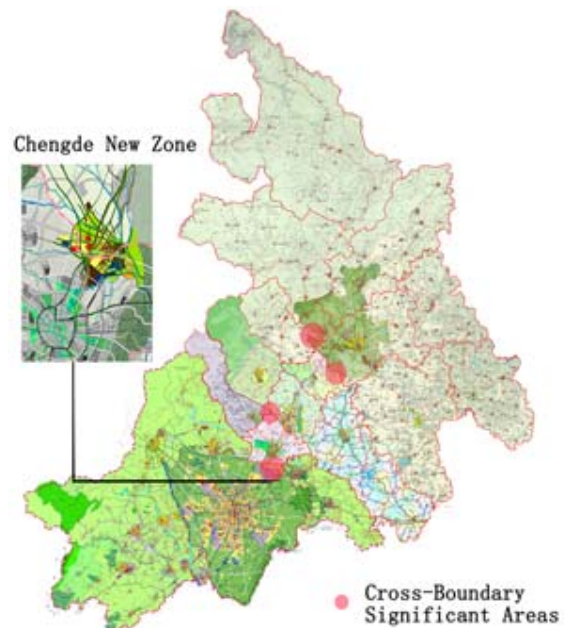


Figure 5 Cross-Boundary Significant Areas

Sources: Author

### ***Proposed Regional Governance Structure in the CMD Cross-boundary Region***

In addition to the spatial governance strategy, the planning also proposes the reorganization of the administration departments for the three cities. In order to put forward the regional planning smoothly and enhance regional competitiveness, a regional authority is urgently needed to handle existing problems related to cross-boundary interaction. Moreover, the legal regulations for the cross-boundary problems also need to be drafted and proposed as the Figure 6 states.

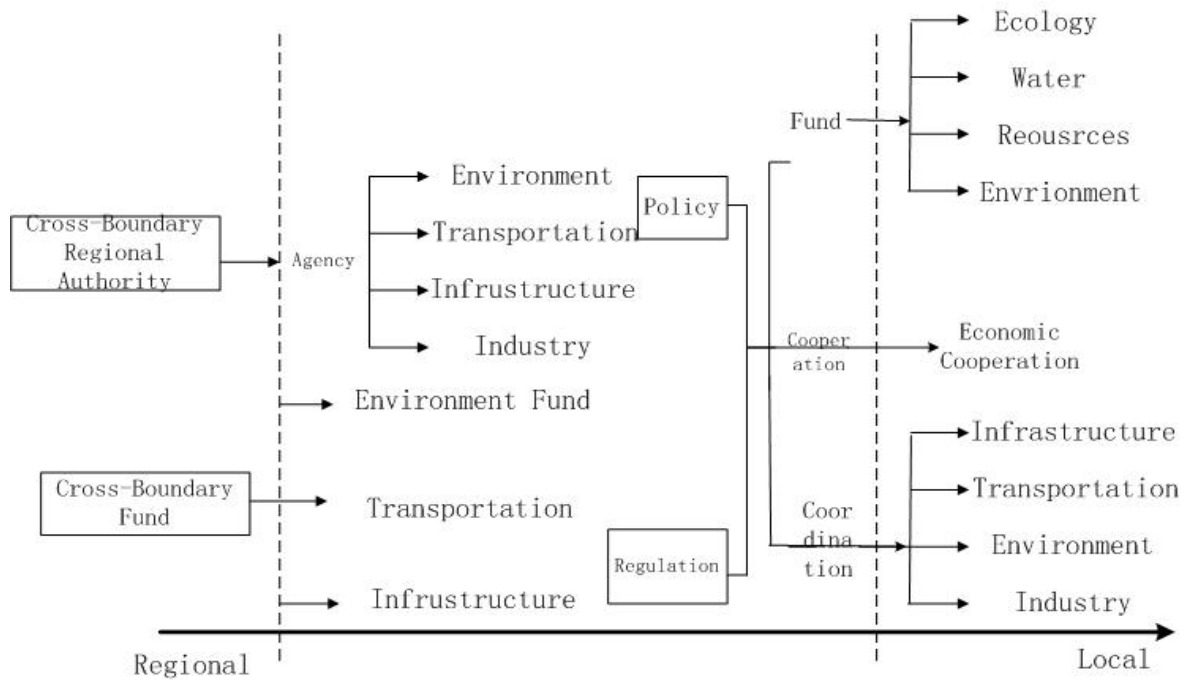


Figure 6 Regional Reorganization of CMD Area

Sources: Author

## Conclusion

Under the influence of globalization and regionalization, China has made efforts to enhance regional cooperation and collaboration towards sustainable development through a top-down approach since 2000s. In contrast to national-led efforts, the Chendu-Deyang-Mianyang Intergovernmental Cooperation and Coordination Planning (CMDICCP) is an example of an approach initiated from the local governments themselves. The three cities intend to adopt an intergovernmental cooperation strategy and advocate regional collaboration to promote sustainability. This paper discusses this intergovernmental coordination planning in detail and highlights the problems encountered in the process. Cross-boundary cooperation involves particular consideration for coordinating environmental protection, energy efficiency, economic development, and infrastructure development. The planning efforts have focused on regional development issues which are outside the range of responsibilities of each individual city but deserve the attention from the three governments on the basis of their mutual interest towards sustainability.

The theory of regional studies and MLG model has been used in the research. Although the concept of MLG has been widely used in the context of Anglo-American world, its capacity to be applied to explain the development of urbanizing China is still contested. The paper discusses the model and mechanisms of multi-level governance involving different layers of municipal and governmental authorities in planning and explores a sustainable way to negotiate and balance different interest groups and develop a win-win solution towards

sustainability. Public participation, intergovernmental meetings, and professional and unprofessional consulting seminars have proven to be effective as they play a major role in the process of coordination. It is argued that the existence of the cooperation planning approach goes beyond mere rhetoric, and provides an opportunity for the policy makers, governments, administrators, experts and public to meet regularly and hold informal and formal dialogues on important trilateral and regional planning and development issues towards sustainability. The intense competition between different administrative boundaries within China is part of the reason for rapid consumption of resources and degradation of the environment without considering sustainability.

This case shows how one particular region has undertaken self-initiated cooperation and coordination with sustainability as the goal, but the challenges and obstacles that this effort encountered in the process show how difficult it will be for true urban sustainability to become the norm in China. The case shows that the difficulties come from complicated levels of the decision-making in the CMD region, which is spread out across multiple levels of government, ranging the provincial, municipal, city, and county-level governments of the CMD region. The difficulties also arise from the lack of a coordinator at provincial level, which could play an important role in cross-boundary governance between Chengdu, Deyang and Mianyang. It is also argued that the planning results and efforts are constrained to the limited administrative rights of the planning department. The administrative rights of the planning departments could effectively facilitate the creation of new zones. The complicated MLG pattern in China makes the sustainable hard to achieve, but the urban planners in China are making great efforts to put forward the cross-boundary cooperation towards sustainability.

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