



True Smart and Green City?
8th Conference of the
International Forum on Urbanism



Conference Proceedings Paper

Bottom-Up Empowerment, Local Partnership, and Sustainable Action: Enlightenments From Localism and Neighbourhood Plan in UK and Suggestions for Urban-Rural Integrated Plan in China

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Abstract: Since 2004, the 'Local Government Modernization Agenda' has promoted the concept of community action in UK, therefore, local power become increasingly important in decision-making and policy-delivery. And the Localism Act in 2011 and following planning reform bring Neighbourhood Plan and rights as well as support to communities, marked revolution of local governance. Similarly, implementation of political and economic reforms from 2013 can be understood as a prelude to social reform pursued by the new leaders of China's government. Automatically, urban-rural integrated plan is highly expected to relieve or resolve urban-rural issues especially local conflicts under the background of 'New Normal'. This article tries to make a brief summary of the background, concept, decision-making and action mechanism of localism and neighbourhood plan in the UK, using information from the government, scholars and social organizations. It considers that China is facing the same challenges of economic and environmental globalization that brings conflicts in urban-rural space. Therefore, with the core issues of interest reallocation, community empowerment becomes a key to urban-rural sustainable development. This article makes suggestions for local urban-rural integrated plan in China: Bottom-up empowerment: the reform of governance, making use of and strengthening the community culture and collective ownership to keep community capacity. Local partnership: cooperating with community-based power, especially remaining collective organizations in the suburban districts or villages, to form grassroots-led decision-making platform including government and other stakeholders. Sustainable action: turning integrated plans from blueprint plan to action plan with clear goals, participations and support to keep them lasting and effective. The experience of community action plan is not a magic solution. On the contrary, it is built on the understanding of local

community. The collective character of the Chinese community gives planning strict but promising conditions that calls for reform in the planning concept and mechanism.

Keywords: Localism, Neighbourhood Plan, Bottom-up empowerment, local partnership, sustainable action, urban-rural integrated plan in China

1. Introduction

Community empowerment is not a new concept in Britain, but it is this years that policies about community issues become eye-catching topics not only in political debate but also in everyday life. Along with the Localism Act 2011 and the following Neighbourhood planning legislation, the ideology of community involvement accomplished its position in the planning system. The power and right that been given to communities, as well as auxiliary mechanism offered by social organizations make it possible for community plans guarantee its sustainability.

Since the ‘New Labour’ got overwhelming victory in 1997, after years of Thatcherism policies by Conservative Party, Prime Minister Blair, followed by Brown, implemented ‘Local Government Modernization Agenda’ which aimed at improving local services, enhancing community governance and increasing public confidence in the institutions of local government (Martin, 2002). In this process, documents and regulations had efficiency by Local Government Act(passed in 1999), Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act(passed in 2004). Compared to former local government in the Thatcher Era, described as weakened and emasculated (Game, 2002), the Labour Party support local government to get involved in local education, social service, benefits administration, housing, environment, culture and fire (Audit Commission 2002b: 5).

The financial crisis in 2008 hit UK heavily, and brought an age of hardship for local councils to maintain highly satisfying services. In 2010, the Conservative won the election and formed coalition government which marked the beginning for new period of reform about local governance and planning system. Although the gap between two parties cannot be ignored, the pace of reform never has been stopped. The coalition government ‘wants the people to be able to influence decisions about new and modified buildings and facilities in their area’, and believes that ‘People have the right to get involved in development decisions that affect them’ (DCLG, 2015), so the Localism Act, been given Royal Assent in 2011, reallocated the rights and obligations of local authorities, with reduced interference from central government, gave more power to communities to participate in, even control development. By introducing Neighbourhood Plan to the statutory planning system and endowing communities with the right to bid, the right to challenge, the right to build, the right to reclaim land, the community voice in decision-making process of planning issues has been greatly enlarged. Besides, the ‘Design support’ and ‘Our Place!’ programme, ‘Barrier Busting website’ and Community infrastructure levy, paved the way for community actions from operation and financial aspects.

At the other end of the earth, China is experiencing great changes in economic, social and environmental sphere. In the 3rd year in office, the new government also facing the complex of local governance, the appeal of giving more power to communities. Unlike its booming years from 1978, China has entered the era of ‘New Normal’, which was put forward by President Xi Jinping, to describe

the years to come as decline in economic growth speed, change of growth momentum and improvement of social governance. As the central domain of Urban-rural development, importance of planning reform in community level has been discovered. In the upcoming 10th year of Urban and rural planning law 2006, with the trend of the 18th National Congress of the CPC, there is reason to believe that the planning system should be more bottom-up and local people should have their voice on development. Perhaps it is too impetuous to totally and uncritical accept the policies in the UK from 2010, despite there are sayings claim that Localism Act was the result of electoral politics and cannot benefits communities whose ability is not strong enough, there are enlightenments from policy making aspect and lessons can be learned for the Chinese policy making and planning practice.

This paper draws a brief summary of the community-focused policy that brought by Localism Act 2011 and following regulations in the UK. Introduce the innovation of Neighbourhood plan, its decision-making procedures, implementation paths and related mechanisms that ensure the sustainability of planning. Cases was selected among the pilot reported by DCLG website through England to give practical description of community planning issues. Inspiration from UK's experience is raised with the reality of Chinese development stage and current planning system. Suggestions for local urban-rural integrated plan in China is made, focusing on bottom-up empowerment through planning system, local partnership in decision-making process, sustainable action for implementation. Boundedness and doubt are also emphasized, to clarify the scope of reference and possible consequences.

2. Reform of planning after Localism Act 2011 in the UK

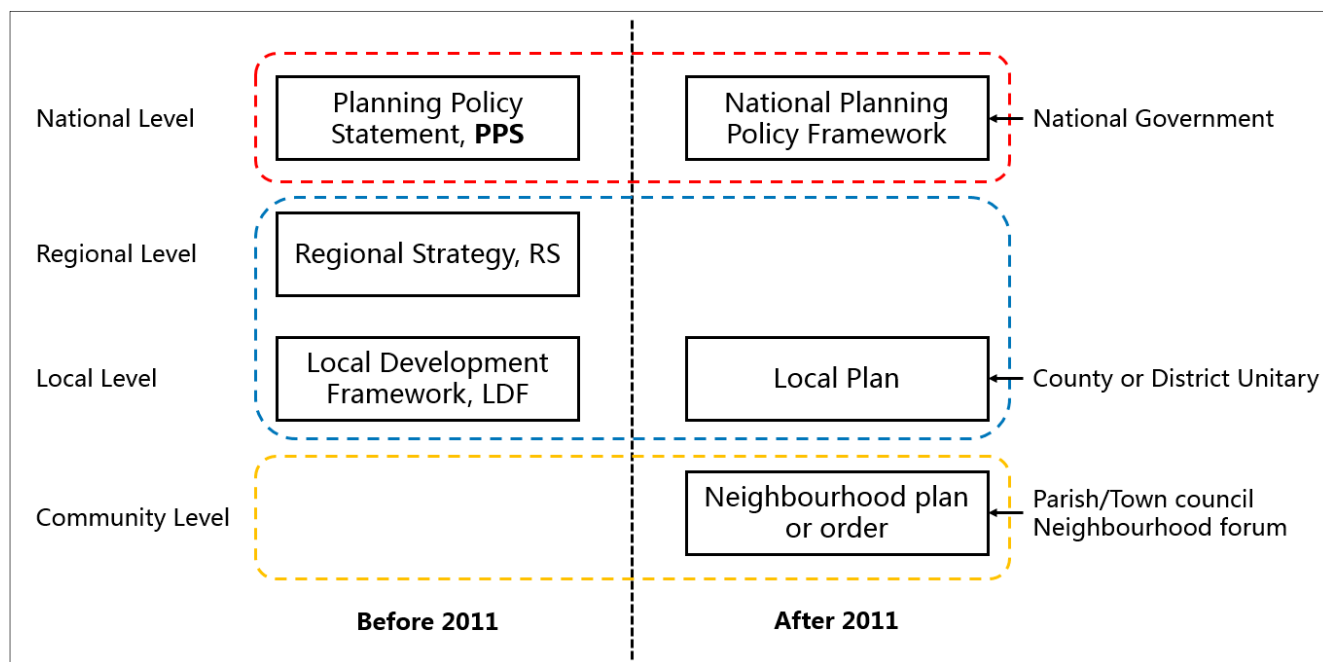
2.1. Planning reform and statutory of neighbourhood plan

The planning system in the UK experienced an epoch-making change in 2004, when the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 come into effect. The new system bought UK into an era of spatial planning instead of land-use planning, of which people think as fundamentally concerned with the coordination of different programmes, policies and projects (Gallent, 2008). However, at least before 2011, the planning system still be seen as centralization and the central government has too much right to intervene (Yu and Yang, 2011). Speaking from the statutory planning system, neither the 1947-2004 system nor the 2004-2011 system had an actual form of community plan. The Parish Plan, Community or Village Design Statement in rural areas do not have the power to give permission to development.

The situation has changed since 2011, when Neighbourhood plan was introduced to planning system with other reforms which can be learned from Figure 1. Together with the abolition of regional strategy, the new born of Neighbourhood plan(NP) made it clear that the trend of decentralization is underway. According to the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act (section 38(6)), once succeed at examination (from local councils) and referendum (in neighbourhood), one neighbourhood plan will become part of statutory development plan by the planning authority and has legal force. Applications for planning permission must be determined in accordance with the development plan, which means neighbourhood plan can attain the same legal status as the Local Plan (DCLG, 2014). Local plans fully retain their primary in determining planning applications and remain central to the planning system (DCLG, 2015), at the same time, given the position in the statutory system, neighbourhood plan connect the neighbourhood with the local council, to a certain extent, rebalance the participants on both sides. To

make it simple to understand, the new system get communities involved by offering them the right to draw up Neighbourhood Plans (NPs) and giving NPs statutory force, integrated with the existing Statement of Community Involvement and information publicity of Local Plan, the power of community on planning issues was enhanced. More than this, the decision-making process of community plan (mainly Neighbourhood Plans), and the mechanism of implementation, both of which will be discussed below, ensure that the community not only have the right to say but also have the ability to take action.

Figure 1. The reform of planning system in the UK from 2011.



2.2. Strengthen of community-led in decision-making process

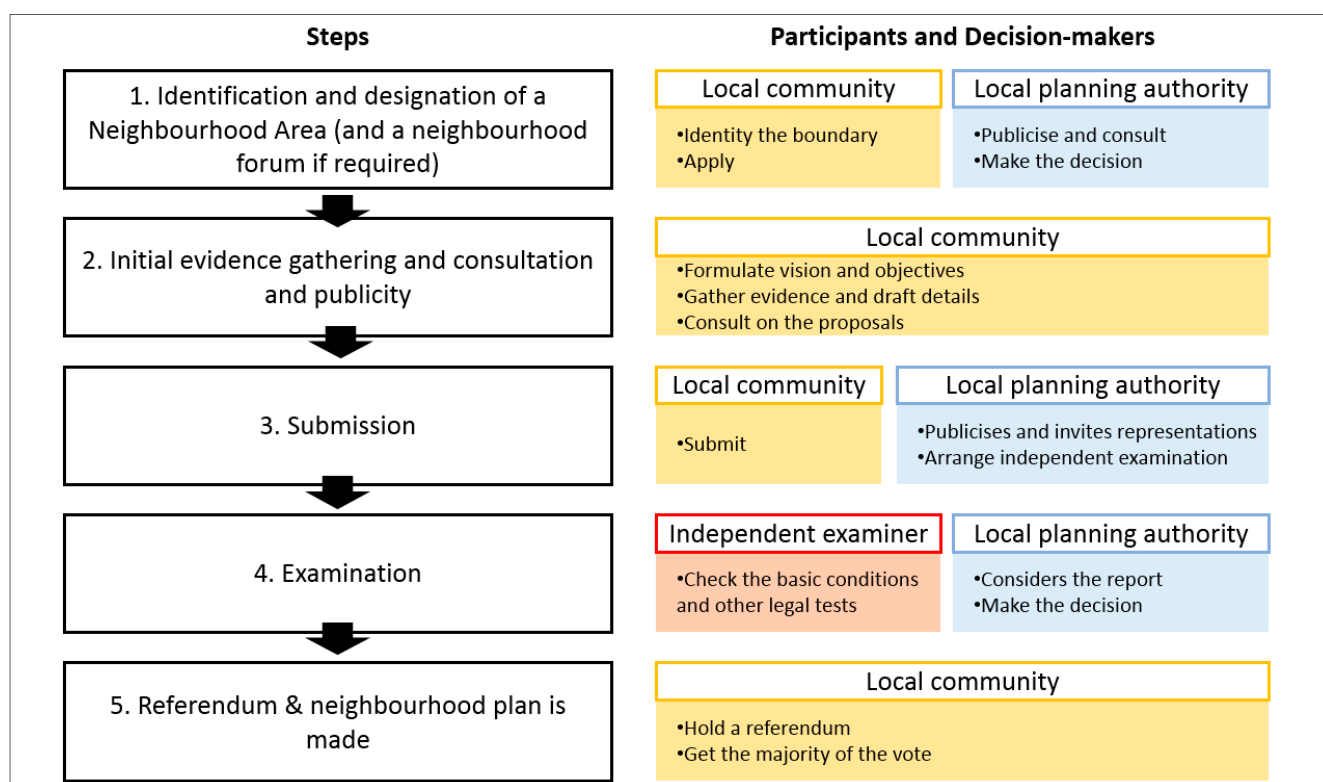
As expressed above, the Neighbourhood Plan is something new, nevertheless, the idea of community-led is nothing rare, long before the term ‘localism’ was adopted by government, rural communities were taking control and deciding on what was best for them (ACRE, 2014). In the process of preparing a neighbourhood plan and making the ‘neighbourhood development order’ which can grant planning permission for the development the community wishes, coordination, democracy and harmony are shown.

Based on the basic logic of planning, there must be an organization or juridical person, to take the responsibility. This is not difficult for rural communities where parish councils and town councils still widely exist. However, when it comes to the communities in city area, some kind of community organization must be set up. The new system have very community oriented rules, offering options of a parish or town council, a neighbourhood forum or a community organization to lead. If wanted, people in a certain area can even apply for to establish a parish council /community council. Also the criteria for establishing neighbourhood forums are being kept as simple as possible to encourage new and existing residents’ organizations, voluntary and community groups to put themselves forward (Planning portal DCLG, 2015).

Five steps are needed in the preparing of Neighbourhood Plan, including ① Identification and designation of a neighbourhood Area (and a neighbourhood forum if required), ② Initial evidence gathering and consultation and publicity, ③ Submission (to local planning authority), ④ Examination (by independent examiner), ⑤ Referendum & neighbourhood plan is made (Figure 2). According to this, the allocation of rights and responsibilities is clear enough to come to the conclusion that community has the channel of Neighbourhood Plan, at the same time, the local councils have the right to decide whether to make the NPs into Local Plan. As a neutral part, the examiner and consultants give reasonable report and recommendations which help communities and local councils to modify the NPs or make decision.

It is widely known that as the essence of democracy, Neighbourhood Plans should be voted by the community referendum, but furthermore, others forms of community-led are throughout all the steps. When preparing the NP, community organization must meet the minimum membership requirements while only a designated neighbourhood forum can ‘produce’ the NP, to meet the basic requirements of representative. In addition, the examination of draft NPs, arranged by local authority and performed by independent examiners, ensure that NPs won’t cause any damage to public interests and share the goal of Local Plans.

Figure 2. Stages and participants in a neighbourhood plan or order.



2.3. Multi-cooperation of implementation mechanism

‘Bring three neighbourhood planners together and it won’t be long before they are asking who foots the bill to make it happen’ (Tony Burton, 2013). More than financial issues, the implementation mechanism is widely accepted as a crucial area in planning policy, especially in smaller scales, like a neighbourhood. The ‘localism’ reform of governance and planning system in UK, is also fruitful in this

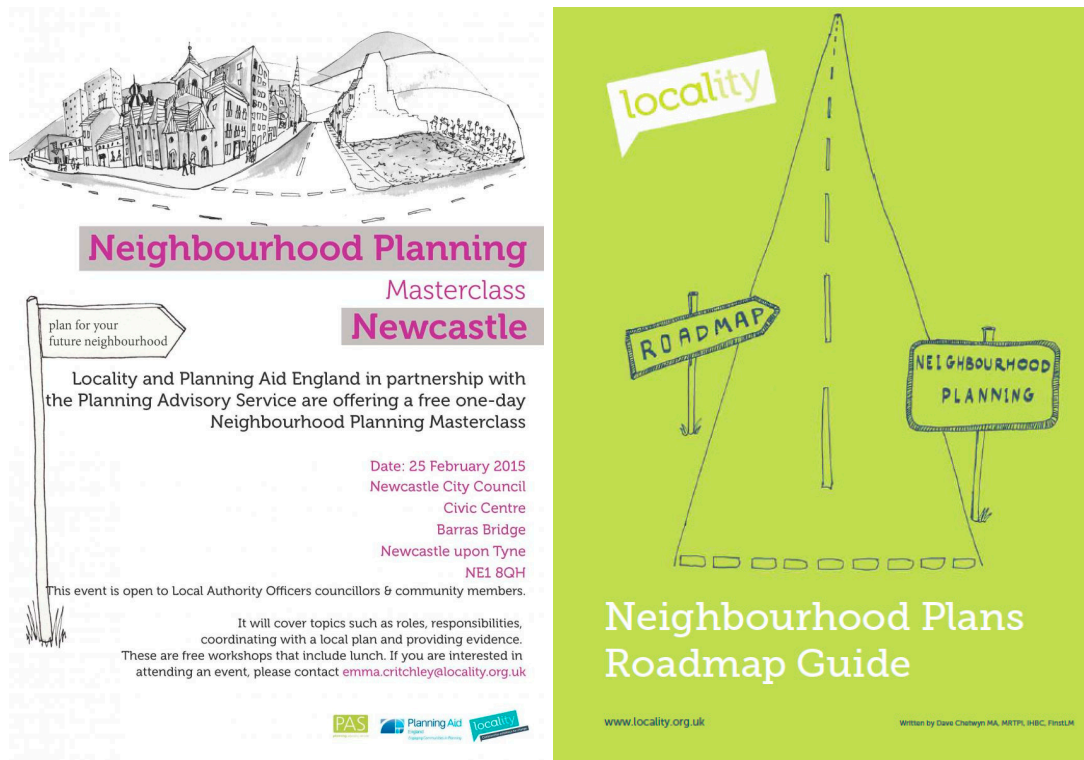
aspect, paved the way for community actions. Several prominent powers are given to communities, which are named as Neighbourhood Development Orders (community right to build), community right to reclaim land, community right to bid, community right to challenge. Besides, the 'Our place!' programme and Community Infrastructure Levy, New Homes Bonus scheme, support the community action in financial independence as well as other methods like Barrier busting website and Design support for communities to offer the platform to get things done for local community. Three kinds of assistance can be seen from all the new system: land-use and development control, budget and funding, auxiliary measures.

The new rights for communities to control land-use and development, in a certain degree, can be seen as the most important tools for the plan implementation. The Neighbourhood Development Order (community right to build in the Localism Act 2011) allows communities giving permission to 'the development they want to see' without the need for planning application. Huge degree of freedom was created, for small-scale housing and other facilities (shops, businesses or others) development. In addition, community is able to challenge, or even replace the local services operation by community right to reclaim land (to bring inefficient used land owned by public bodies back to life through making requests to DCLG and acquiring it after that), community right to bid (to give the community groups a chance to save assets that will be sold by 'pausing' the sale and bidding for it), and community right to challenge (to make it possible if voluntary and community groups, charities, social enterprises, parish councils, local and fire and rescue authority staff to bid to run authority services where they believe they can do so differently and better). The localism formed a model that if community is strong enough, the autonomy can realize into the control of community development and local services which may reduce the costs for local councils as well.

Coming with the rights, financial support is closely following. Direct and indirect channels are offered in law and the programme: The Community Infrastructure Levy, new in the regulations, allows local authorities to charge new developments in the community to raise money for services and infrastructure enhancement. What the point is, certain proportion of this funds can be transferred to neighbourhood (15% or 25% depending on whether there is a Neighbourhood Plan) where the development take place. What can also be consider as a 'reward for communities receiving new development', New Homes Bonus scheme give 'cash back' if new homes are built in community area and take effect in whatever ways community like, whether a reduce of council tax refund or support of local services. The 'Our place!' programme is available funding or budget as well as a mix of technical advice for communities to 'revolutionise the way a neighbourhood works' (DCLG, website).

Have guaranteed the power and funding to contribute, communities are provided with the auxiliary measures to make themselves better. Local people who find things undone could use the Barrier busting website to complain, that forms a 'non-stop' path to speak to the central government. If it is decided to help, the barrier busting team will get rid of unnecessary requirements (sometimes time-consuming bureaucracy) to deliver the right help. The Design support for communities, offered by the Design Council, working with the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI), the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS), the Landscape Institute, the Home Builders Federation and others, is aimed at better and easier design process for communities where plan or design advice and toolkits are needed.

Figure 3. Plain guidance for communities from consultants (Sources: taken from <http://planning.communityknowledgehub.org.uk/> [left] and <http://locality.org.uk/> [right]).



2.4. Negative feedback that worth considering

However, clear understanding must be reminded before references are concluded. All the way with the establishment of Localism Act 2011, suggestions and criticisms never stopped. Comments maybe scientific and it is known that all reforms will encounter resistance. It will be valuable if negative feedbacks are also considered in our work to make a comprehensive understanding.

Confusing, at the first time, is what local people recognized after the Neighbourhood Plan was introduced. There are many kinds of community plans is in process before NPs, maybe even just finished or in operation not long enough for revising. But the funding available is only for communities with NPs, so doubts and difficulties are emerged for others whether bother to cost the money and time to have new consultation and referendum. According to Eden District Council, the Upper Eden Neighbourhood Plan referendum cost them £16,500 which is really a big expense. It is the ‘demystifying’ of Neighbourhood Plan, when and how it should be used is the key issue (ACRE, 2014) for promotion of new policies. Therefore, the idea of community based planning reform is welcomed, but the relationship of new power and new form of plan may worth more examination.

Then, if the political context of ‘localisms’ is also taken into consideration, questionable points can be found that the reform of planning system and the newly given community power, seems like some kind of ‘exchange’, carrots that been offered to people to get their vote. The rebalance of power between local councils and communities hasn’t touch the power the central government is holding. Obviously,

the planning system itself is still up-bottom, and the rights (of bid, challenge and reclaim land) can be seen as autonomy of community and weaken of local council. However, for the neighbourhoods where straight aid should be transferred, communities lack of enough capacity to reach a NP, isolated villages without proper public services and develop momentum, more assistance should from government other than the imaginary power without funding to bring it on ground.

Nevertheless, the intention of auxiliary measures is wonderful and the website, the aids from professional consultants would be great helpful to communities. The hope for this is only sustainable, to form the system or institution to help, in law or social consensus. Perhaps it is not so appropriate, but the Barrier busting website seems like the action of 'I will tell your Mom', making the central government in an embarrassed position and it won't be welcomed by the local councils.

Anyway, the localism is the reform of governance system, emphasizing local and community. Great determination and implementation capacity are needed, which have been shown by the coalition government. Facing the economic crisis, excessive weakening local councils are not helpful to provide services but the closing health center, surgery, bus routes...are very important for local people. Maybe, the paradox of bottom-up and up-bottom will take more time to be solved, the experience in the UK bring us a good example.

3. Enlightenments for urban-rural integrated plan in China

It will be too subjective to introduce Britain's experience to China without take the institutional and developmental background into consideration. Along with the globalization, China is turning its way of urbanization to a multi-target path, meaning the harmony of environment, society and economy. 'New Normal', used for the description of China in coming years -slower speed of economic growth, more need for social well-being, more friendly to the environment, calls for the innovation and reform in planning, especially about urban-rural integrated plan. From the beginning, Chinese planning system was always bottom-up and urban-focused. Contradiction emerged and conflicts has been shown these years when the urban growth largely expanded in urban-rural fringe. Urban-rural integrated plan has been introduced and emphasized, while more reform is demanded. The following suggestions are drawn from UK's experience of planning reform concentrating mainly on the system, partnership and action.

3.1. Bottom-up empowerment: reform of planning system

It is hard to have a voice, except one get the power to determine something. The planning system was centralized planning system for a long time, while the communities, can hardly put forward their views in the statutory plans. Through more and more opportunities are giving to local people to get involved by public participation methods, the short of communication is still being accused, not to mention communities to have their own plan and bring it to the statutory system.

However, during the expansion of urban, lots of existing communities will be under reconstruction or overall relocation while some of them may have the collective ownership of land. It is apparently that community should have the rights to determine and shape what their future home looks like. The best way to empowerment is to introduce the community plan (or change village plan to community-led) which reflect the demand of local people, to an effective situation. The combination of up-bottom planning system (Urban-rural comprehensive plan, District master plan, town master plan etc.) with

bottom-up planning (community plan, community schemes, neighbourhood agreement etc.) will be the integration of power from government and local people, which will arousing common goals of local environmental, economic, social concerns to enhance community social capital and reach harmony.

3.2. Local partnership: shared decision-making platform for stakeholders

There are strong community capacity in China, where Danwei Compound (or unit compound, people in the same working place form the community) and Rural Collectives (the ownership of rural land is shared by the rural community) contribute to the social governance for a long time. Based on the culture of community, it is necessary to transfer social capital to real effect. The community-led plan should be a decision-making platform for stakeholders concerning about the community, including the local residents, collective organizations, local business, third sectors, volunteer groups etc. and the local government, developers. Professionals should be involved to make suggestions as well as technical backup.

Learning from Britain's Neighbourhood Plan and taking Chinese planning circumstances into consideration, the community-led decision process must make clear of three topics: (1) the leading role should be responsible for local people, which means it should be local organization or residents' assembly but not the government body; (2) enough discussion and negotiation should be made, before a widely accepted compromise but not an order; (3) public interest mustn't be harmed, meaning that democracy doesn't necessarily led to 'do as one pleases'. In the suburban districts and rural villages, basic conditions and demand, sufficient atmosphere for community-led decision are well occupied, where community plan could have its pilots.

3.3. Sustainable action: implementation mechanism

One step in the action is better than non-fruitful words, when it comes to planning, the implementation mechanism is indispensable part of a good plan. Not only in China, blueprint plan faced much difficulties in the implementation making it embarrassed for so-called good plan and nothing good for local people brought into reality. According to Britain's experience, the land-use and development control, budget and funding, auxiliary measures are keys to action. Therefore, we can give several suggestions based on Chinese situation.

First, the ownership of collective land could be the basement of community plan. Unlike development lead by the government (changing the ownership to state-owned), the land owned by the community is easier for people to gather strength and attitude. While community overseas are looking forward to seeking the dominant right of land, Chinese communities (in the suburban and rural area) have the ready resources. Then, the financial condition of Chinese communities is not optimistic therefore it hard for local people to improve facilities all by themselves. Grants should be delivered to community level to support and business run by communities may also helpful. The ownership of collective is a big asset to guarantee financial independence. In addition, assist about design, community construction etc., could be offered by volunteer organization and professional consultants. Only with continued attention and joint efforts, can integrated plan really last and be effective.

4. Conclusions

Community empowerment and grassroots-led, bottom-up planning, are hot topic in all over the world. Because the wake of democratic consciousness and the failure of centralization planning system on local issues. However, there is more saying than action and it costs great determination to reach decentralization and touch the interest inherent in governance. The Localism Act 2011, though too early to make firm conclusions, show us the attitude to benefit local people by giving the right to them to shape their community. The Neighbourhood Plan and reform of planning system, also gave a lesson to China and other countries. It is the institutional changes, the statutory status of Neighbourhood Plan and attached rights that really changed the situation. Also, the community-led decision-making process shows the outstanding design of planning which brings all stakeholders into one shared platform. The supporting mechanism makes the plan into realistic, shows the importance of cooperation and shared goals by the relevant. Suggestions could be made to Chinese planning reform, learning from Britain's experience, it is clear that the existing community culture and collective ownership of land will be the key to community plan. While the reform of governance and planning system are crucial institutional factors. Once be given the power by the law, communities can really take the tool of plan to improve the environment. The partnership of development in China will be much more complex. Community should be the leader, but platform should be open to all stakeholders. Any ignorance of potential participant may result in conflicts in the future. Besides, the implementation mechanism should base on the factors discussed above, and change the blueprint plan to action plan, to get all the hope to a final realization. Maybe it will be a long time before China reach a stage that democracy reform be seen in everywhere of the governance system, but there is reason to believe that it is on the road of review and change which indicate the better future of communities.

Acknowledgments

This paper is started when I was in the School of Planning and Geography, Cardiff University, being a visiting student under the supervision of Dr. Yu Li who gave me much support about comparison of planning system between the UK and China. During the writing period, I was honored to have meetings with Professor Alison Brown, Dr. Huw Thomas and Dr. Alastair M. Smith. They kindly gave me suggestions about community planning and I want to give my thanks to them. Besides, I visit community councils of Llanwrtyd town and Llangammarch where I met the respectable councillors, they showed me the actual situation of community action which is valuable to my research. I would like to thank all they have done to help me and the volunteer work for the communities.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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