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Influences of city-county consolidation on the conception of urban-rural planning and development: a case study of Tainan city, Taiwan

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Different forms of state rescaling and local government reorganizations—including city-county consolidation, annexation, merge, interlocal agreement, and special district—have been considered plausible strategies to deal with cross-boundary environmental and economic issues, such as climate change, watershed governance, global competitiveness, smart governance, and so on. In Taiwan, national and local governments regard city-county consolidations as one of the effective approaches to deal with the issues. In 2010, three city-county consolidations were approved and conducted, including the consolidation of Tainan city and county governments. For the national government the consolidations is a necessary administrative action in coordination with the needs of national land planning and regional governance, but for local governments the consolidation deeply relates to the issues of local finance, administrative efficiency, spatial governance and development. The results of consolidation will directly influence the life of local residents, the quality of public service and the development of urban and rural areas.

From a perspective of regional and rural planning, the benefit of consolidation seems great. Before consolidating, the city and county governments not only lacked coordination, but competed to each other in certain conditions, such as fighting for national subsidies and investments, and eager for industrial and residential developments. The national government expects the consolidation will lead to a more appropriate, cohesive and balanced spatial development and land management in urban and rural areas. Nonetheless, the expected result is not as a matter of course.

In the process the consolidated government has faced a series of institutional challenges in order to respond to the new jurisdiction, boundary and socio-political situation. For spatial planning, the process involves the needs not only to adjust institutional arrangements and to form new organizational culture, but also to reconceptualize the urban-rural relationship and its correlated spatial issues, and to reconstruct planning concepts and discourses in response to the new spatial concept. This reconstruction involves articulation between certain problems—which are recognized as essential and underpinned by the new conception of urban-rural relationship—and given solutions. The process is inherently political and will consequently influence urban-rural development a lot. But less attention has been put on this issue in previous urban-rural planning or city-county consolidation related studies.

In light of this, via literature analysis, in-depth interviews and discourse analysis this research will explore whether and how the consolidated government of Tainan City reconceptualizes the relationships between urban and rural areas, and whether and how the concepts influence the institutional arrangement and practices of spatial planning. The research results will advance the knowledge of relationship between city-county consolidation and urban-rural development, and deepen the understanding of the role of concepts in institutional design and practices of spatial planning.