

Preface

Rural communities in China and beyond are severely disadvantaged when compared with their urban counterparts, which has led to rural-urban migration in the promise of a better life, or migration of workers to cities, with concomitant social problems such as the ‘children left behind’. Whilst much attention is focussed on urbanisation and the challenges of burgeoning cities, means of revitalising rural communities have received comparatively less attention. With this in mind and assisted by the Australia-China Science and Research Fund, a multidisciplinary ‘group mission’ was assembled to examine ‘community enterprise development with connected infrastructure systems’. The authors believe this represents one of the first attempts by a multidisciplinary research team, encompassing the disciplines of social science, business, architecture and planning, engineering, and finance and economics, to assist rural communities find sustainable and self-reliant ways for their development and transformation.

The project, led by the Australian Centre for Asian Business at the University of South Australia, involved a team of researchers from universities in China, Australia and Europe who collaborated on planning, fieldwork, workshops and the development of integrated approaches. Poverty-stricken rural communities in remote mountainous areas of China were selected as the focus of investigation, in an effort to find ways to increase their prosperity, diversify jobs and improve their social livelihoods. The research concentrated on opportunities for the development of social enterprises facilitated by social entrepreneurs and community leaders, supported by infrastructure, partnerships, finance and other enabling mechanisms. Whilst acknowledging that community development also requires education, health and other services, empowering and assisting communities to operate their own enterprises are seen as fundamental to employment generation, trade and improving incomes and self-esteem.

Being consistent with the aims of the group mission, namely to build ongoing bilateral relationships between China and Australia that could lead to more intensive investigations, the research team was able to gain a general understanding of the various contexts and challenges, with opportunities for transformation to more prosperous futures, whilst recognising that the knowledge and data are incomplete and more in-depth work is required in the future.

The group mission research focussed on rural China and was later supplemented by fieldwork and discussions within Malaysia, supported by an Australia-Malaysia Institute grant. This work, which sought to build bilateral relationships between Australia and Malaysia on the benefits of information and communications technology (ICT) for rural and remote communities, provided some additional perspectives on approaches to rural community development, which are summarised towards the end of the book.

Therefore, this work is unique and important for decision makers, leaders and entrepreneurs to have access to a wider range of options from which to select appropriate modes of community transformation, especially those which are planned and implemented in a connected-up, synergistic manner. By presenting a conceptual model and systematic planning framework, it aims to stimulate new ways of thinking and to illustrate a multidisciplinary approach to the complex challenges of rural community development. By engaging with, assisting and empowering communities, this is expected to help them uncover connections and synergies between various topics, leading to innovative and breakthrough solutions. For example, interconnected community enterprises based on clean forest products, forest carbon and ecotourism can be underpinned by local infrastructure enterprises (e.g., renewable energy, water, waste management, ICT, transport) and financial mechanisms (e.g., carbon finance), all involving skills development, leadership and social entrepreneurship coupled with partnerships with the corporate sector and investors. These interconnected approaches are expected to generate increased employment and prosperity, improve social livelihoods and benefit the environment.

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We hope that this volume will stimulate further interest, debate and research on this important topic, and we welcome approaches for collaborative work.

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