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*Decentralization and Marketization of Education in China:
Challenges for Migrant Children and Social Harmony*

The education problem of migrant children has become a pressing and sensitive issue after China has engaged in economic reforms since the late 1970s. The increase in migrant workers from rural areas working and living in urban China has raised the issues of equal treatments of different ‘citizenships’ in urban and rural areas because of the duality system introduced since the foundation of the People’s Republic of China in controlling population flows from rural to urban areas. The growth of peasant workers in Chinese major cities has challenged the conventional household registration system (also known as *hukou* system). The most recent National People’s Congress just convened in March 2010 in Beijing also touched upon the issues related to reforming household registration system, which has been found as a major source for social inequality in China. Part of the problems related to social inequality resulted from the *hukou* system is children coming from peasant workers’ families would have difficulty in getting into local schools in urban China for education. It is against this context that there has been a strong voice from the migrant workers’ community for the eradication of educational inequality between migrant worker children and locally born children in urban areas. What has intensified the educational inequality is closely related to the policy of decentralization (both in administration and financing) adopted in running education in the past three decades. At the same time, the privatization and marketization of education has inevitably resulted in creating a ‘new mountain’ (heavy financial burden) currently experienced by the Chinese citizens in the mainland. This paper sets against this wider policy context to examine critical issues confronting peasant worker children’s education, with particular reference to examine the most recent policies and strategies adopted by the governments in China mainland in dealing with the growing educational demands from migrant worker children and the policy implications for promoting social harmony in China.

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Can China Tackle the Challenges of Social Development?

The Chinese government has encountered enormous challenges on its social development since its economic reform in 1978. Firstly, the wealth gap between the rich and the poor has been widened that directly threatens China’s social stability. Secondly, a large number of migrant workers have always been discriminated, excluded from accessing basic urban services and various types of insurance schemes. Thirdly, many Chinese workers are being exploited by companies that not only pay them below legal wages but also fail to provide them with a safety and healthy work environment. It should be stressed that central government has issued many administrative orders, urging local authorities to provide public services for migrant workers and also passed labour laws to protect the rights of workers. However, the existing administrative and legal deficiencies, including local authorities’ resistance on implementing central government’s policies, the suppression of workers’ rights over forming independent trade unions and taking industrial actions, and the judiciary’s little