Area-based competition and awards as a motivation tool for public service provision: The experience of Xining, China

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Area-based competition and awards as a motivation tool for public service provision: The experience of Xining, China

Bingqin Li and Yongmei Zhang[1]

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Abstract

We examine the role of area-based competitions and awards in motivating local government investment in, and provision of, public services. We compare these policy tools with other motivation models such as consumer choice and targeting/benchmarking. We argue that area-based competition is particularly useful in two aspects: motivating local authorities, and enhancing public awareness. It is especially useful in policy areas related to improving the public environment. The experience of China in organising competition projects to improve public hygiene provides an example of how this can be achieved. A case study of Xining City, Qinghai Province is used to illustrate the roles and limitations of the approach.

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[1] Bingqin Li, Lecturer, Department of Social Policy, London School of Economics, A250 Houghton Street, London, WC2A 2AE, Email: b.li@lse.ac.uk, Tel: 02079557344
Yongmei Zhang, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Lanzhou University, China

1. Introduction

There are many situations in which one authority ("the Centre") is interested in promoting a certain policy in many local governments ("the local authorities"), and is facing the following three challenges at the same time: (1) local officials are not intrinsically motivated, and the Centre does not have the power to force them to make the policy a priority; (2) success requires the cooperation of the general public including individuals or businesses, who are also not intrinsically motivated; and (3) successful enforcement requires local knowledge and initiatives.[2] Public environment is one policy area that faces these kinds of challenges not only in China, but in many other countries also. Competition and awards that are based on judicial areas are often used to deal with the problems. However, how they work and why they can help to achieve the goals of the Centre are rarely discussed carefully. In Europe, recent examples include the competition for European City of Culture and, in Britain, the competition of City in Bloom Competition and Garden Village Competition. In Singapore, in the housing sector, there is the Island-Wide Cleanest Estate Competition. The competition for hosting the Olympic Games is a worldwide example. In China there are many examples, one of the most important of which is the Hygienic City Campaign. It has been running for many years. The experiences and lessons from China can be useful in understanding the impact of this type of policy tool.

In most previous studies, these competitions or awards are analysed as strategies for place marketing (Sjoholt, 1999) or the contribution of culture to urban regeneration or development (Sassatelli, 2002; Balsas, 2004; Evans and Shaw, 2004). However, we are interested in looking at how *area-based* competition may fit into the on-going debates over how to improve public services. This paper discusses the advantages and disadvantages of area-based competition and awards as a policy tool, and thus spell out under what circumstances policy makers may consider using area-based competition and awards, and under what circumstances a more traditional tool such as targeting is more appropriate.

The paper is organised as follows. In Section 2 we examine different models of motivation in public services. Section 3 discusses the model of area-based competition and awards. In Section 4 we look at a particular case, the Hygienic City Campaign in China. This case has been chosen as it represents a particular large-scale, multi-leveled scheme which has been running for more than 20 years. Section 5 illustrates how local authorities have responded to the incentives of such a campaign in Xining City. Finally, we consider what lessons can be drawn from this case study if it were to be applied to other situations.

2. Public sector motivation

The multi-dimensional challenges discussed earlier are often studied separately in the literature, each holding a large body of theories and studies. There is little attention to bring them together and outline the connections between these strands of theories. However, in a principal-agent relationship, it is not uncommon that a principal will need to face all the challenges at the same time and find each of the tools discussed in

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[2] Birney (2014) analyses the problem of local authority shirking and predation in a context of significant levels of discretion, for China. Faguet (2004), Faguet and Sánchez (2014), and Faguet and Wietzke (2006) discuss different aspects of this dynamic in detail for other countries.

the literature insufficient to tackle the problems. Therefore, a more holistic approach is often called for to tackle public management.

2.1 Motivating public sector employees

Improving the motivation of service providers in the public sector can be implemented through a positive approach, i.e. to reward best performances or a negative approach, i.e. to make the non-performers suffer from the consequences. There are a number of tools that are associated with these two approaches to motivate public sector employees.

The first tool is using performance related pay (PRP, or merit pay) to motivate staff members. This is largely a positive approach in which better performance is rewarded financially. This model assumes that individuals try to maximise their income, so they would be eager to improve performance if they can earn more money as a result of better performance. This has been increasingly used as a tool of motivation in the management of public sector in many countries. There is evidence showing modest improvement in the services concerned, such as that presented in the survey of performance related pay in the education system in Britain (Burgess et al. 2001; Marsden and French 1998) and in the healthcare system in Italy(Adinolfi 1998). However, the outcomes are not as good as the theorist would like to see and on the contrary, has incited criticism. First, the impact of PRP is very difficult to observe. Because of the complexity of public sector jobs which often involve many departments having almost incomparable positions, little systematic information can be obtained effectively. As a result, the measurement of performance is often poorly designed (Arrowsmith et al. 2001; Buchan and Thompson 1993). The result is that reward schemes tend to be viewed as unfair and divisive by the public sector employees (Marsden and Richardson 1992) (Marsden and Belfield 2007). Also, even when differences in performances can be properly measured, the differential pay is also criticised for not being significant enough to compensate for the difference in work contribution (Forest 2008). As a result, PRP can potentially affect staff morale (Marsden and Richardson 1994). Similar results have been found in the evaluation of PRP in public services in France, Britain and the United States (Forest 2008).

In some occasions, PRP may generate perverse incentives and crowd out the altruistic behaviour of some public sector employees(Frey and Jegen 2001; Frey and Oberholzer-Gee 1997). Liu and Mills (2005) examine the PRP for healthcare professionals in China and found that doctors would provide unnecessary care in order to increase their income. In Britain, there are also findings showing doctors or teachers who used to work overtime voluntarily may decide not to do so, if they are not paid for the extra hours or if they think the extra pay is not high enough(Marsden 2000).

A second set of tools are 1) targets with associated penalties, or (2) a benchmarking system in which the providers are compared to comparable private sector providers (Martin, 2000). The idea behind these tools is to hold the service providers accountable for the outcomes. This can be made into to a negative approach which is dependent on individual's fear to lose out either financially or in terms of their future career or it can be made into a positive approach in which those who meet targets or reach performance benchmark levels are rewarded. These tools seek to emulate the *effects* of private sector competition, without any *actual* competition

(Glennerster, 1991; Grimshaw, et al., 2002; Le Grand, 1991). Targets and benchmarks can be effective in achieving specific goals. They can offer a good reference point for people to strive for. It is particularly good at maintaining a minimum standard in the related area (Kouzmin et al. 1999). Also, unlike individually based performance pay, rewards for targets based on the principle of 'winner takes all' would not involve disputes around whether the reward or punishment is sufficient to cover specific activities (Propper and Wilson 2003). Of course, they also face criticism. One problem is that service providers have no incentives to do more than the necessary minimum to achieve their targets (John, et al., 2004). Also, targets and benchmarks do not necessarily encourage innovations and may even *reduce* the public sector's ability and willingness to innovate (Le Grand, 2006). In this sense, if targets and benchmarks are very detailed and staged, it would automatically generate a detailed agenda of enforcement which can focus service providers' attention on the targeted areas and become rigid and less responsive to user needs (Flynn 1986). The second problem is that in terms of effectiveness, the negative approach will require the Centre to have the capacity to impose effective sanctions. Restricting funding is a particularly effective sanction. However, when the Centre does not control local funding, sanctions are unlikely to be nearly as effective (Boyne, 1996). The third problem which is also related to the first problem is that in a targeting or benchmarking system, it is often the case that only the indicators that are measured by principals affect the behaviour of agents (Bevan and Hood, 2006). The behaviour local residents and businesses and other members of society, however, tends to remain unchanged. Furthermore, the consumer feedback may be ignored if the complaints are not part of the targets, and if the agents are actively gaming the system (Bruns, et al., 2004(Croxson and Atkinson 2001). For example, Ravallion (2007) used evidence from poverty reduction from China to argue that "standard measures of targeting are found to be uninformative, or even deceptive, about impacts on poverty and cost-effectiveness in reducing poverty" (Ravallion 2007). In many projects operated by the World Bank, there has been a shift from targeting towards more holistic assessments (Mansuri and Rao 2004).

These motivation tools have a central theme: to align the interests of the principal and agents so that the latter may be able to act in the interests of the former. However, as discussed, the shortcomings of these tools cannot guarantee that the service providers can be properly monitored and motivated. As a result, the benefits gained may be cancelled out by the costs.

2.2 Encouraging users to motivate public sector performances

The introduction of user choice is an attempt to increase the capacity of performance monitoring by turning users into principles. It takes care of more aspects of the services than the straightforward motivational tools discussed earlier. It is not only a motivational tool for service providers, but also a tool to empower the users(Barnes and Walker 1996; Le Grand 2006a). First, users can vote with their feet if they are not happy with the services. This puts pressure on the service providers to improve the services. This is similar to the theories on competitive market in the private economy. Second, in order to make choices, users have to learn about the services and take greater interest in understanding and monitoring services. As a result, users are more actively engaged (Le Grand 2007)(Matosevic, et al., 2008; Fotaki, 1999). However, for the motivation and empowerment to be realised, there are

a number of conditions to be met: 1) users are either fund holders themselves or their coming and going may change the funding position of the service providers. 2) The users can have real alternatives to turn to when they need to choose. 3) The costs for users to shift to different service providers are not prohibitive. 4) Users have the ability to make choices, not only in terms of financial costs, but also in terms of many other factors such as knowledge, information and physical ability (Greve 2009). However, in practice, these conditions can be hard to be met in public sector services. First, some service providers have a natural monopoly, so users have no alternatives even if they are not satisfied with the service (Boyne, 1996).

In some services a natural monopoly can be overcome by enabling the consumer to use service providers further away from home (McGuire, et al., 1987). This can be realised when it is necessary to have affordable means of transportation to make these distant choices possible. Time is also a factor that needs to be taken into consideration. Even if transportation and time are not a problem, there are still many services in which a natural monopoly cannot be easily broken. Environmental and community services are obvious examples. Unless residents are prepared to move their home to another area, the service providers may face no effective pressure from consumer exit. After all, consumer exist is "passive". Service users are not real stakeholders, have no obligation to help improve services, and feel no sense of loyalty. In fact, lacking loyalty is important for users to be able to put effective pressure on providers(Hirschman 1980). In this sense, user choice encourages a split between service providers and users. This may not matter in many situations, but it is definitely a problem when the outcomes that the service deliverers desire require user contribution or cooperation. For example, a clean environment requires that local residents help maintain it.

Another way to involve users is via competition between political parties in the local democracy (Boyne, 1996). However, elections often involve many issues at the same time, and if a certain service is not on the political agenda, it may have little effect on the result of an election and user choice cannot be exercised effectively in relation to each individual service.

Another tool to involve user participation is user voice, i.e. users do not simply leave when they are not satisfied with the services.[3] They can voice their complaints so that the service providers can improve accordingly (Hirschman 1980). Voice can function in two ways. First, voices can provide inspirations for initiatives to make the service providers more efficient and responsive. Second, improved accountability can itself make users more satisfactory with the services. However, for voice to work, the service providers have to have the motivation to listen to user complaints or suggestions. Also, users need to be interested in their voice heard. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Making use of voice takes time and confidence. It is likely to be hijacked by the articulate middle class and work against the interests of the poor. In this sense, comparing to voice, choice is a more equitable solution rather than the other way round (Le Grand 2006b).

2.3 Combining voice and choice-- Unsolved problems

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[3] Obviously, local democracy may also be considered to be user voice. But in this part we only discuss voices that are directly addressed to service providers.

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To overcome the shortcomings of voice, choice (or exit) is often used alongside with voice. This means, users can leave if their voice is not heard. Hirschman (1970) does not support this practice. He suggests that exit can potentially undermine voice because if people have the ability to leave, they may not be interested in making their voice heard. But despite of its widespread acceptance, this criticism is not always supported by evidence (Dowding and John 2008). Williams and Rossiter (2004) examine the experience in education and healthcare in different countries and show that the "introduction of effective voice mechanisms alongside choice mechanisms should limit movement of users between providers." In this sense, choice may be able to reinforce the effect of voice.[4]

Various forms of (quasi-) market competition featuring competition between providers can be a good tool to combine choice and voice. However, they all have limits. Some criteria need to be satisfied first before market competition can function adequately.

First, users should be educated and know what they should demand. However, this is not always the case in reality. Users can be ignorant. They do not know what to anticipate, what to choose and what to voice. Existing studies suggest that user ignorance may exist for several reasons. 1) Users do not have sufficient information. This may be resolved if an independent body can broadcast the necessary information (Scannell 1989; Beales et al. 1981) or the regulators can use regulations to require information provision by the service providers. 2) Users may not be able to make judgements even when they have sufficient information. This can either be a result of physical conditions or a lack of ability to process the information given. Literature on the practice of involving user participation in decision making in the healthcare sector has shown that patient ignorance, mental and physical imbalance and shyness prevented them from participating effectively (Sainio, Eriksson and Lauri 2001). 3) Users simply do not demand certain services or have no idea what they should get from the service providers. For example, not all children are aspired to go to universities; or people living in rural areas may not aspire to certain public services that are necessary for living in cities. This may also happen to newly arrived immigrants coming from different cultural, social and economic backgrounds.

Second, service providers may not educate the users to demand more. This can result from two factors. First, from the perspective of service providers, the better educated are the users, the more likely that they may identify problems with the services. Therefore, it is rational for service providers to provide less information about a service. As we have discussed earlier, putting information in the public domain by either the regulator or by an independent body may resolve this problem. However, when users do not know about the existence of certain services, users may not look out for the information in the first place. Learning to demand these types of services may be more difficult than learning to demand a TV set. For example, good public hygiene may not be very obvious to many people. If a person has never travelled to a clean place, even if he/she is told that it is necessary for a public space to be clean, he/she may not be able to visualise a desirable outcome. When this is the situation, the policy makers face a dilemma. On the one hand, the potential service

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[4] Faguet and Ali's (2009) findings from Bangladesh support the importance of voice and exit in making local government responsive. Channa and Faguet's (2012) survey of international experiments in decentralization provides evidence on the importance of electoral exit as a tool for motivating public officials.

users do not have the motivation to demand a service. On the other, service providers do not have the incentive to provide it either.

Third, taking one step back, it may not always be a result of service providers' lacking in incentives that the services or information are not provided. Local service providers themselves (even if always well-intended) may not be inspired themselves. This issue may be more serious in countries where regional disparity is very serious and the local service providers may not be aware of better practices or do not know how to achieve the desired outcomes that the Centre has asked for.

A further question is, if there is no demand for the service, then why is there a need to provide it at all? The kinds of services that may suffer from these problems are services that are related to public environment, public health and, in some countries or communities, education. However, the non-existence of demand may have negative externalities and in the long run generate social costs for the other members of society. Therefore, it would be important to be able to "inspire" or educate the users and at the same time motivate service providers to provide the services which are not demanded by the public. Then how can this be achieved?

3. Area-based competition and awards

The analyses earlier suggest that a quasi-market system based on competition between service providers cannot help to improve services when there is weak demand for service improvement that maybe useful for the community. Therefore, policy tools that can help to align the interests of the service providers not only with those of the Centre/regulators, but also with the users become crucial.

Area-based competitions and awards mean that local governments or service providers working for different areas compete for a prize that the regulators or higher authorities offer. In an area-based competition, the participants from different areas compete against each other to become the best performer. Awards can be slightly different from competition in that the winners can be everyone that passes the threshold.

The difference between area-based competition and provider-based competition is that the former offers a mechanism to motivate service providers that enjoys local monopoly. By putting it in competition with other areas, the local service provider is turned into a "representative" of the area. If properly crafted, winning the competition can boost local support. The mechanism is that in the competition, people living or associated with a certain area share a local identity. Once people in the local area acknowledge this identity, they will be proud if their own "team" wins or is rewarded in the end. In this sense, motivation schemes that try to build on local identity can potentially turn the originally alienated service providers and users into members of the same team and share the same goal. Therefore, they may make joint efforts to help each other. Also, as the higher authorities/the centre set the targets or criteria for winning the competitions, the local team formed by service providers and users may work together to achieve these goals. In this way, the interests and the three parties, the centre, the local authorities/service providers and the users are in line with each other.

Theoretically, such a mechanism can deal with the problems discussed earlier. First, because the competition helps to define the identity and generate a sense of

community, service users may potentially be proud when their area wins the competitions. As a result, they may be happy to contribute when necessary, even though this may mean that they need to make personal contributions. Second, service providers who may benefit from user contribution would be more willing to educate the users so that the users do not by any means affect the performances negatively, even if they cannot contribute. Therefore, the service providers are willing to share information with the users. Third, because the service providers are competing against other areas, it is important for them to understand what the criteria for winning are and in what ways the competitors are doing better. This motivates the service providers and users to aspire to better performance and overcome the problems of low demand. Finally, because of the honour associated with winning and the greater awareness of the benefits of the services concerned, the prize awarded to the winners does not have to be high enough to cover the costs of running the campaign. This means that the organisers of the campaigns do not have to devote a lot of resources.

In the following sections, we will use the case of Chinese public hygiene campaigns to examine whether what the theory has predicted turned out to be the case.

4.   Area-based competition (ABC) for public hygiene in China

In China, ABCs are frequently used as a motivation tool. While it has been dismissed as a Communist style political campaign (Zhang and Li 2011b), the impact of this type of motivation, the reasons for its popularity, and the mechanisms through which the motivation works, deserve a closer look. Its ability to take advantage of identity to align the interests of the centre, the local authorities/service providers and the users may contribute to the existing motivation literature.

China has a highly fragmented local government system with several layers of government between the Centre and street level authorities and a large number of local authorities[5]. This makes it extremely difficult to motivate the local authorities. In the history of imperial dynasties, the Emperor's power travelled down along the administration system, but would not go further below the county level. Local administration was not controlled by the Centre. This means that when the local government did not aspire to good governance, the local services could deteriorate. ABCs were introduced during the Central Planning era (1949-1978) and continued to evolve after the economic reform started.

ABCs are usually initiated by higher authorities. Participants are lower authorities. Participation can either be voluntary or compulsory depending on its design. It can be about a single policy goal, for example, GDP growth, foreign investment growth or university entrance rate of high schools. It can also be a

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[5] The Chinese government has a five layer government system: 1. Central Government; 2. provinces, autonomous region, cities under the direct control of the Central Government (34 authorities at this level); 3. regional, League, autonomous state, regional city (333 authorities at this level); 4. county, autonomous county, Qi, autonomous Qi, county level city (2859 authorities at this level); and 5. village, minority village, township (40813 authorities at this level). At the central level, there are a number of central authorities that deal with different aspects of the society, for example, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education…. Local governments, except for those at the bottom, i.e. village and township level, usually mirror the structure of the central authorities. As a result, even if we only look at provincial level, there are 34 local authorities that work in the same area. One layer down, there will be 333 local authorities working in the same area nationwide.

complex task that will involve a whole range of goals and targets. In the following part of this paper, we use one of the largest scale and oldest ABC's in China, the Hygienic City Campaign, to see how the centre, the local authorities and users are brought together to improve public hygiene.

4.1 The Hygienic City Campaigns

Public hygiene is a policy area that faces the problems we have discussed above. First, local authorities do not necessarily prioritise public hygiene and public environment. In the wealthier cities and popular tourist destinations, public hygiene has improved greatly in recent years, and the general public is more aware of the importance of keeping the public environment clean. In other areas, local officials may not consider that public hygiene is able to contribute to economic growth, and treat it as a cost item. Therefore, the costs should be reduced. Also, it may be that local officials are unaware that hygiene standards should be improved. After all, they are likely to have grown up in such an environment (Shen, 2004). Second, public hygiene suffers from low consumer demand. In many parts of the country, people do not appreciate efforts to maintain good public hygiene (Xi, et al., 1998). Therefore, local people may not demand improved public environment. What is more, maintaining good public cleanliness requires the collaboration of local people. If they do not appreciate it, their behaviour, such as littering, spitting, or waste dumping, can make it very difficult for local authorities to improve the situation.

ABC's were introduced in the 1950s to clean up the environment. They were stopped during the Cultural Revolution but resumed in 1978. In 1989, the State Council decided to organise a campaign to reward the cleanest cities, so as to solve the motivation problem and stimulate public support (1989). The "Hygienic City" campaign was born.

Hygienic City is a combination of targets and competition. The targets include a series of standards for quality of environment, service sector hygiene, and bug control. The participants are geographically defined. There are campaigns for cities, urban districts, or townships/villages. Participants need to satisfy a range of targets to be evaluated by the inspectors from the campaign organiser. The campaigns take place at regional, provincial and national levels. For a participant to enter a higher level of competition, it needs to win at the lower level and be recommended by the governing authorities to move on to the next level. Finally, at the national level, winners receive the title of Hygienic City and awards from the National Patriotic Committee (now the Disease Prevention and Control Bureau of the Ministry of Health). Their achievements and efforts are also published in the national media. Local businesses, public agencies and individuals who are considered to have made outstanding contributions during the competition, are awarded by the local authorities (The National Patriotic Committee PRC, 1989). From the past experience, there have been less than 10 winners at the national level each year. More recently, there have been only 2 or 3 winners each year.

4.2 Incentives to participate

It is important to know that participation in these campaigns is voluntary. Then why do local authorities participate at all?

First, if local authorities achieve good results in the campaigns, the officials would have a better opportunity to get promoted (The National Patriotic Committee PRC, 1989). Cases in which some mayors have gained significant political capital through their achievements in improving city hygiene are well publicised by the organisers of the campaigns. In order to ensure the campaign receives local support, the mayor of a city often promises promotions or awards to lower level officials if they helped to achieve the desired outcomes (Dai and Wang, 2007).

Second, to boost the performances, the higher authorities (e.g. provincial government) that recommended a local authority (e.g. city government) to participate in the campaign may agree to cover some of the costs of the campaign. The financial incentives coming together with the honour of being recommended are attractive enough for the local officials to decide to participate.

5.   A case study of Xining

In this section, we use the case of Xining, the capital city of Qinghai Province in west China to illustrate how an originally less inspired local government responded to the incentives of ABCs. Xining is a relatively poor city in China. Being an inland province, Qinghai's economic development is well behind that of the eastern provinces. Xining's rapid growth began only recently when the national policy to "Develop the West" was introduced. We do not think the case of Xining is representative of all cities in China. However, this city suffered from all the problems we discussed earlier at the same time. Therefore, it can serve as a good example of how these difficulties may be addressed through the Creating Hygienic City campaign.

The data used in this paper was collected by the authors in 19-20 October, 2008, during the final inspection period of the competition. Four types of information were collected: (1) official documents, (2) official statistics, (3) the authors' observations during the field trip, and (4) two surveys involving 32 street vendors and 99 people in the street. The official documents and official statistics help us to see whether the campaign has helped to focus the attention of local authorities and generate significant investment in public hygiene. The surveys were designed to help us to see whether the public education goals of the competition had been realised and whether the public were supportive of the competition.

We interviewed street vendors because they always work in the public space, and were thus a prime target for the public hygiene campaign. We sent the interviewers to the two largest street markets in Xining: Minzhu Road market and Shuijing Lane market. The sampling method was equal distance selection of the first one out of every five vendors. Six out of the thirty-two vendors normally operated in other areas, but were asked by local officials to move from their original business site to one of the two organised markets. There can be some drawback with this sampling method as we can only capture people who are relocated to new business sites but not those who are driven out of business because it is not practical for them to move to the new business site allocated. Therefore, it may be possible that the level of support we can get through this sampling is higher than if the people who were driven out of business had also been included. However, if people were driven out of business, this should in principle be captured in the survey of individuals.

The individuals interviewed were selected at six different sites where streets crossed each other in the city centre. The interviewees were divided into three age

groups: younger than 30, 31-60, 61 and above. The ratio of the age groups was 3:5:2. The sex ratio was 52 men to 48 women[6]. Each of the six interviewers[7] stopped passers-by, and carried out the interviews after confirming that the candidates met the two sampling criteria. Ideally, it would have been better to carry out some in depth interviews at people's home. However, this was made difficult as the timing of our research was quite sensitive and interviews of this type need to be arranged via community leaders. Considering that all the communities are nominated for the final stage of the competition[8], interviews in the presence of community leaders can be strongly biased. In this sense, stopping people randomly in the street and carrying out anonymous surveys, though not ideal, provided an opportunity to obtain information offering more insights on the issues at hand.

The official data and documents were mainly used to show the workload and the outcome of the campaign. To make sure that we did not only receive the documents that are presented to the inspectors which might only show the nice stories, we have collected documents and official speeches to the local residents before the final campaign. These were speeches trying to plea for greater efforts from the general public and private businesses. Therefore, some of the key difficulties during the earlier part of the campaign are highlighted. We tried to check between different documents for consistency, so that we would not only get a beautified image of the campaign.

5.1 Physical changes brought by the campaign

Xining decided to participate in the Hygienic City Campaign in 1999. According to the description of some local residents we interviewed, the streets were poorly maintained. Piles of garbage could be seen everywhere. People threw litter and spat in the street without hesitation. According to the Xining government (2008), more than 80 percent of the small businesses in the service sector suffered from low quality hygiene facilities and poor cleaning. Few farmers' markets had covers. The plan to meet the basic requirements to join the Creating Hygienic City competition was finalised in 2003. In the meantime, a series of local hygiene campaigns was implemented. In 2005, the city won the title of Provincial Hygienic City. In 2008, it finally reached the minimum requirements for entering the national competition. In June 2008, the final campaign for the competition started. During 19-21 September, 2008, Xining was inspected by officials from the National Patriotic Hygiene Committee. According to the design of the competition, the inspectors came in disguise and collected evidence independently. The result was that Xining passed the initial stage of the campaign and was allowed to go through to the formal assessment in October 2008. The October results were not satisfactory; however, the city then entered for a second assessment in 2009 and received the title in the end.

After the campaign, dry pit toilets were renovated. 65 farmers' markets were formally organised. Some farmers who used to pile up goods on the pavements

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[6] The age and sex ratios used in the sampling are calculated according to the numbers published in the Xining Statistical Yearbook, 2007.
[7] The interviewers were master's students from the Sociology Department of Lanzhou University. They had received training before the interviews.
[8] Our presence in some neighbourhoods as strangers in several local communities during this period had caused alert from the community leaders as we were told later that the locals thought we were central government inspectors in disguise.

received their own stalls, and others were allocated space inside covered markets. Street vendors were licensed and required to help keep the markets clean. Small businesses improved significantly in their pollution control, sewage processing, waste disposal, noise reduction, guaranteeing food safety, and also fire protection. Places that particularly attracted insects and rats were cleaned up. Moreover, the amount of green space per person in the urban public area increased from 2.3 m^2 per person in 1995 to 7.57 m^2 in 2008.

Some of these achievements were direct outcomes of following the campaign guidelines[9]. There were clear targets to meet. Households, estates and businesses were required to take care of the space in front of their doors. Property owners were fined if they allowed graffiti and illegal advertisements to stay for more than 14 hours. Shop signs or business façades were supposed to be cleaned regularly or even renovated. Drinking taps and toilets which had been accessible to state enterprise employees only were opened to the public. Small business owners, especially those in the food and catering sector, had to follow strict hygiene criteria.

These outcomes depend on the local governments' awareness, ability and willingness to enforce the policies. With the campaign, local officials have to study the requirements of the campaigns very carefully and try to enforce the campaign requirements. The format of area-based campaign holds the local authorities accountable for their performance. This makes them keen to enforce the criteria as the state suggests.

5.2 "Teaming up" with the public

At the start of the campaign, people were reluctant to support it. People were detached and thought it was the responsibility of the government. Businesses defaulted on the promised they made. Earlier inspection results were very poor. The local government realised that they had to rely on public support to be able to achieve the desired results. The cleanliness of the public environment can only be improved and maintained if individuals changed their behaviour, stopped littering, spitting in the streets and polluting the environment, and instead did their part to keep the public environment clean. The experience of earlier public hygiene campaigns showed that small fines were largely ineffective, and that significant behaviour change only followed once public hygiene became a value espoused by the local people.

The effort to resort to "patriotism" by highlighting the competitiveness against other places was evident in Xining and the outcome became observable during the final campaign period. There were special newspaper columns, TV programs, and telephone hotlines to spread the news, distribute information about the campaign and report complaints. Students were lectured on the campaign, and teachers organised meetings together with parents to distribute the information. In residential areas there were community-based performances, leaflets were distributed, advertising boards were used, exhibitions were staged in galleries, and public participation was sought. A special website was also established. Gradually, more people began to appreciate the campaign. One key result was an increase in the number of volunteers who came from

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[9] A detailed introduction of the requirements at different levels of the campaigns can be found in Zhang and Li (2011a).

all different sectors of society. Our interviews show that at the time of the inspection all 99 individual interviewees had heard of the campaign. Sixty-seven were aware of the purpose of the campaign; 53 out of the 56 people who understood the motivation for the competition believed that it was intended to improve the living environment and image of Xining. Only three people were cynical and felt the competition was all about making the local government look good. Twenty-two of the 32 street vendors interviewed knew what the competition was intended to achieve, and 20 knew why Xining needed to compete. It seems that the public were aware of the on-going campaign and a quite large proportion of them took part. On the other hand, the understanding of most people was not very detailed.

Apart from handing out information, the education campaign also used strategies to build up the "team" spirit, such as "I love Xining", "Let's run the campaign together", "Cleaner Xining will give visitors a good impression", etc.. In a sense, these campaigns helped to define the physical boundary between the city and other competitors and the "mental" boundary between Xining residents and outsiders. It nurtured a sense of pride among local residents and intended to motivate them to make their contribution to the campaign. We could see that numerous people from all backgrounds were involved in the campaign. Employers, neighbourhood committees and schools also organised small groups of volunteers to clean up public spaces, hand out leaflets, and put on street performances. Among the 99 individuals interviewed, 67 had actually taken part in one or more of the activities that were part of the competition. Twenty four of the 32 small business interviewees participated in one or more of the activities.

Despite these efforts, the level of public support as measured by the level of participation, i.e. the proportion of people taking part in one or more of the activities during the campaign, was less than 70 percent. In winning cities this proportion was usually above 75 percent. The Xining Government attributed this relative lack of success to not using sufficiently innovative methods to motivate the general public. Although a lot of information was provided, people in Xining did not pay as much attention to this as the government would have liked (2008). This turned out to be a big disappointment not only for the government, but also for the local people. After further efforts, the city had finally fulfilled the criteria and there was a strong sense of celebration.

5.3 Learning from others and developing local strategies

The competitiveness of the campaign also encouraged the city officials to look out for good examples from previous winners and visit other competitors to learn from their experiences in order to copy good practices. They participated in the training programs offered by the campaign organisers and collected the past winners' campaign documents.

The campaign generated a sense of urgency. The government officials became much more open to suggestions and criticisms. They were eager to hear about good practices and suggestions for improvement and to adapt existing practices to fit local circumstances. The approach was pragmatic and aimed at problem solving.

A key issue faced by Xining was that it was not possible for this city to spend as much money as the richer cities. As a result, it needed to identify its own strengths and take advantage of these. The city worked out that it had a much higher rate of

green space per person, but needed to focus more on cleaning up the city. Relatively speaking, it is easier to mobilise volunteers in Xining than in more developed cities. These strategies helped the city to be able to compete with lower spending.

5.4 Localised finance

As discussed earlier, city officials, if not especially motivated, may not realise that they would need to spend a lot of money on cleaning the environment. If there were no competitive campaign like this, they would not prioritise funding for it either. With the campaign, the spending on city hygiene was unprecedented.

Most of the money for participating in the national campaign came from the public sector: the provincial government, departments in the local government, district authorities and state-owned enterprises. According to the statistics kept by the Xining Government, the Qinghai (provincial) Government set aside 800 million yuan to improve the infrastructure and promote general social development. Some of this money was used for building small-scale urban construction projects and an infrastructure for improving the environment. The Transportation Department of the provincial government allocated 40 million yuan for regenerating the back streets of Xining. The Health Department contributed 10 million yuan specifically for cleaning the city. Xining government, including several departments, contributed 435 million yuan in 2008. The district authorities and the state enterprises contributed more than 150 million yuan. The details are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Spending by the Xining government and district authorities

Funding source	Usage	Amount (million Yuan)	Notes
Administration Bureau	City cleaning	54.24	
Transportation Bureau	Small-scale infrastructure construction	318.54	
Bureau of Commerce	Regeneration of farmers' market	51.01	
Bureau of Forestry	Green Space Improvement	11.50	
Subtotal		435.29	
Districts			
East District		55.62	
Central District		46.14	

Including State enterprises under the city government		59.33 thousand yuan	
West District		14.13	Promised to invest 23.32m
North District		23.63	
Dongchuan Industrial Park		12.54	
Total		596.60 million yuan	

Source: Xining Government, Statistics for the funding of the 2008 Hygienic City Campaign

The reason given by the officials for spending so much money also confirmed the theory. It is about local pride and the pride of the officials. A document published by the Patriotic Hygienic Campaign Committee of Qinghai Province (2008) stressed that Xining as the capital city of Qinghai, serves as a window to the outside world. Participating in the competition could improve the city's hygiene and at the same time set an example to other cities in the province. What is more, it could boost the image of the whole province in the nation and impress potential investors. Not only the city thought so, the provincial government that recommended the city to participate as a representative of the province also felt the need to offer support to the city. As a municipal official (20 October, 2008) commented to the researchers:

"Once we decided to participate, we just could not afford to be mediocre. I do not think we would have been punished for not winning. Actually for Xining, even if we only spent the money allocated by the province and did not make contributions ourselves, we could get by. But we (officials) also have pride. Once we participate, we want to do well and we do not want to lose face in front of other provinces."

Individuals and private businesses were another important source of funding. Their contribution took different forms:

(1) Donations, usually organised at the community level. For example, market vendors contributed money to thank the cleaners who worked in their market. Residents contributed money to reward the street cleaners of their own neighbourhoods[10].

(2) Payment for services and facilities. Individual businesses were required to update their facilities or pay for services offered by the authorities. The amount could be large, as when investing in new ventilation and sewage system, or it could be small, as in improving the aesthetics of their stalls. (3) Some private businesses were required to open their private facilities to the general public, in particular their toilets and water taps (Xining Government PRC, 2008).

5.5 Problems that appeared in Xining's campaign

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[10] "Donation" is the term used in the official documents. However, we do not rule out the possibility of cases of compulsory contributions, or voluntary contributions but under government or peer pressure.

The atmosphere in the final stages of the competition was intense, particularly so when the inspectors came. All activities that could have affected the results were put on hold. This had significant costs. There were many inconveniences for local residents and businesses. For example, informal street markets were closed down, and street vendors and shoppers had to move to organised markets. Among the street vendors we interviewed, six out of the thirty-two had to move, and eight reported that the competition had had a negative impact on their business. Because the traffic was under heavy control, some small businesses found it difficult to secure their supplies, and business costs were much higher than usual. Twenty-nine interviewees reported that the competition made their life less convenient. The most discussed inconvenience was grocery shopping, mainly because of the closure of the informal street markets. In addition, markets were required to close earlier than usual.

A second problem was the very high frequency of inspections of small businesses. In some places, inspectors exhibited a condescending attitude and totally disregarded the practicality of possible improvements. The inevitable result was resentment felt by small business owners. The intensity of inspections justifies the doubts expressed by a number of interviewees in Xining as to whether the level of effort is sustainable. In some cases businesses cynically gamed the system by not offering toilets to customers, thereby making it easier for the restaurants to keep the toilet facilities clean.

A third problem is that many resources were used for arguably unrelated urban modernisation projects. This observation can be confirmed by the transcribed speech of Mayor, Yulin Luo in Xining Communiqué (2008). According to him, one of five steps to improve Xining in the future months of the campaign was to accelerate the demolition of old neighbourhoods, the implication being that older houses were associated with poor hygiene. Instead of cleaning up these neighbourhoods, they should be demolished. However, Xining has been regenerated so greatly in the last decade that the whole city is almost newly-built. Even before the campaign it was very difficult to find houses built before the 1980s. During the campaign, houses built in the 1980s and 1990s became targets for demolition. In this paper we avoid the debate concerning the impact of such frequent demolition of neighbourhoods on people's livelihoods. Nevertheless, it is apparent that the goal of improving public hygiene has been entangled with the attempt to modernise the city. However, it is difficult to blame the city authorities for this. In the campaign document published by the organisers, the term "beautifying" was used several times (The National Patriotic Committee PRC, 1989). The danger of such vagueness in the design of the campaign is that beautifying a city can take up resources that could be spent on improving basic services. For a city which is already relatively under-resourced, the costs of the competition could be exceptionally high.

6.   Conclusion

Local governments' participation may derive from different motivations. These include the intrinsic motivation to improve services and personal career development. In terms of trying to make use of these motivations, area-based competitions (ABCs) are no different from other types of competitions. What makes them different is that they are able to mobilise the local authorities and service providers as well as the service users by aligning the interests of the three. What we could see in Xining's case

was that local governments, including the provincial government, city government, and district authorities, were all keen for the city to perform well in the campaign. They indeed prioritised the campaign and spent large amounts of money to make improvements, especially during the final stage. The relationship between the users and the government was also transformed. The public did not only treat the campaign as a government project, they began to consider themselves to be members of a team and were willing to make efforts to support the campaign. This is because ABCs can help to form a group identity for members of the local society and encourage user participation. What we saw in Xining is that both local officials and residents started to view other cities as competitors and users, officials and service providers are willing to work together as a team to achieve the common goal: winning the campaign. As a result, the decoupled relationship between service providers and users in consumer choice model can be avoided. Because user voice can help local authorities win, local authorities are more willing to listen to suggestions and are more open to innovative ideas that can help the city gain an advantage. They may also be an important source for local innovations.

As predicted by the theory, the educational effects of ABCs are very strong. The learning experience has several dimensions. First, participation in competition is a learning-by-doing process. Through the feedback received from the organisers of the competition and the experiences of other cities, Xining's leadership realised their own weaknesses and set out new working plans for the next round of inspection("Xning Communique" 2008). Second, cities are encouraged to learn from each other and good practices spread and are adapted faster than during non-competition periods. Third, the dedicated campaigns through public media and the school system became sessions of intensive education. The direct benefit is that local residents get to know what is possible and hopefully in the future, they start to demand an improved public environment or voice their dissatisfaction.

With these advantages, the ABCs are very good at dealing with uninspired local authorities and service users, and overcome problems caused by low demand for desirable services.

Boyne (1996) studies competitions between local authorities in Britain and concludes that a large number of authorities are required to ensure competitions are truly competitive. Also, because a competition is typically run at a particular time, there is a risk that improvements do not persist beyond the time in which the competition is judged. What is more, the performance of participants has to be judged, and in situations of asymmetric information, there may be opportunities for rent seeking and corruption. Our studies do not contradict his findings. In addition, it is important to point out that as there is no clear signal in the system to show how good is good enough, the competitors would compete to do better, i.e. spending ever more money and devoting ever more time to achieve better results than the other competitors. What we may see is a tendency to over-demand and over-invest.

- When the campaign is highly prioritised, the level of attention and resources mobilised may not be sustainable in the long run.
- When the number of competitions increases, it becomes burdensome for one local area to handle multi-competitions at the same time. This indeed happened in China. The massive increase in the number of ABCs exhausts the local authorities and residents. The central government ended up carrying out large-scale crackdowns in 1996 and

2006 in order to reduce the number of competitions (State Council Office of PRC, 2006). In 2007, 1705 national level competitions were cancelled, as well as more than 90 percent of competitions organised at the local level. However, experience from the past shows that because of its effectiveness as a motivational tool, the number of competitions tended to creep up again over time.

- Overly enthusiastic officials might be able to abuse public support. When the government starts to take public support for granted and begins to work single-mindedly on the competition without taking into account the potential costs to the public, this risks alienating supporters.

There is no built-in mechanism in the Chinese system to stop overshooting. Therefore, ABCs became increasingly controversial, even with the positive outcomes. However, given that it is the Centre but not the market that decides what is desirable, it is very difficult to "cap" performance.

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