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The China Institute for Reform and Development: A Key Institution for Development

In recent years, I have had the opportunity to participate in various forums organized by the China Institute for Reform and Development (CIRD) which is based in Haikou City on Hainan Island in the People's Republic of China. These forums are major platforms on China's reform agenda, attended by a wide range of participants including party leaders, local authorities, international scholars, and policymakers. The most recent forum was the 91st International Forum on China Reform, where the theme discussed was "China in Establishing a New System for a Higher-Level Open Economy and the World," and this forum was held at the end of October 2025.

China initiated the "Reform and Opening-up Policy" in 1978. This policy relaxed centralized control and has been implemented and evolved over more than four decades. The establishment of special economic zones in the 1980s and accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 are notable changes. In domestic policy implementation, reforms have been conducted step by step, including the development of the private sector, the liberalization of wages and prices, and the promotion of exports and foreign investment. Since 1978, the annual average economic growth rate has been around 9 percent. By the 2020s, China had eliminated extreme poverty. In terms of normal GDP, China had



become the world's second-largest economy by 2025, with a GDP of US\$14.9 trillion.

It is interesting to study how this development was achieved. We can also promote development by adopting similar reforms duly adjusted to our own circumstances such as political, economic, and social conditions. In this regard, the following article is based on a step-by-step review of research papers prepared and submitted by CIRD on China's reform process.

Government policymaking plays a significant role in building a modern, developed nation. To be pragmatic and sustainable, such policies require, among others, wisdom, innovative ideas and robust evidence-based research. To this end, think tanks are the organizations capable of providing such intellectual support. Think tanks study and analyze political, economic, and social issues and provide practical policy recommendations to government administrative mechanisms.

A prominent example that highlights the importance of research institutes which is also relevant to Myanmar is the China Institute for Reform and Development (CIRD). Throughout China's transition period, CIRD has had a major influence on the policymaking of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in crucial areas such as economic and state-owned enterprise reforms, and financial stability management. Therefore, CIRD's experiences and operational models can offer valuable lessons on the fundamental role played by robust research in formulating policies to address Myanmar's current political, economic, and social challenges.

CIRD's Role and Historical Achievements

Established on November 1, 1991, in Hainan, CIRD has been an important policy research institute throughout China's history of Reform and Opening Up. With its policy recommendations, CIRD has played a key supporting role in the implementation of the CCP's national policies, demonstrating how research-based reforms can lead to success.



CIRD has written and submitted over 500 reform-related reports to date, some of which have been directly cited in the decision-making of the Central Committee or have been important references in the drafting of important laws and regulations. For example, it is learnt that CIRD's research contributed to the formulation of decisions of the Third Regular Session of the 18th Central Committee in 2013. In addition, CIRD has conducted over 200 training sessions.

CIRD's major achievements can be examined sector by sector. In the area of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and financial system reform, CIRD, in 1993, proposed a shift in SOE management from "state management" to the management of "state-owned capital," which was crucial for improving the economic efficiency of enterprises and maintaining and enhancing the value of state-owned assets. Moreover, in 1994, it proposed policy recommendations to effectively control inflation during a period of rapid economic growth, and in 1995, it recommended banking reforms to address non-performing loans (NPLs) and strengthen the banking system.

In the sector of government and social welfare system reform, CIRD proposed in 2003 to transition the government model from an "economic growth-oriented government model" to a "public service-oriented government," aimed at improving administrative efficiency and the quality of public services. Similarly, in 2003, it proposed to establish a basic welfare system for rural residents and provide guaranteed basic public services (e.g., health, education). As guidance to economic transformation, CIRD published a series of books from 1993 to 1996 that supported the transition to a market economy, explaining the theories and ideas related to market reforms, which were also important references during negotiations for accession to the World Trade Organization.

The China Institute for Reform and Development (CIRD) has been providing key policy directions for China's major economic and social changes since 2008. In 2008, CIRD highlighted the need to change the economic



development strategy and advocated for consumption-led growth as the main strategy. This proposal guided reforms related to landownership, demographic imbalances, and consumer-based reforms. Similarly, in 2009, when the global financial crisis broke out, CIRD compiled and presented 24 policy recommendations to address the challenges posing from the crisis.

During that period, it recommended that the 12th Five-Year Plan (2011-2015) be more effective by adopting “Transformation of the Development Model” as the main direction.

Between 2008 and 2009, CIRD repeatedly urged the implementation of equal rights, social security, and justice for migrant workers from rural to urban areas, comparable to urban citizens. From 2014 to 2017, it recommended the abolition of the urban–rural dual household registration system, which contributed to social justice and urban population growth.

To change the direction of development, in 2011, CIRD urged shifting the reform path from focusing on “state prosperity” to “people's prosperity.” Furthermore, in 2013, CIRD played a key role in drafting the essential Roadmap of Reform Outpacing Crisis, which is essential for the Central Committee’s comprehensive reform decisions.

CIRD also focused on structural reforms as a main direction, guiding economic transformation. From 2016 to 2017, it presented recommendations for economic transition. In 2016, it proposed initiating a second round of opening-up to reflect an economy transitioning from goods to services in trade. In 2015, as a third-party research group, CIRD conducted the first evaluations of the governance reform process in implementing the “Decentralization” and “Deregulation” policies.

Regarding international relations, between 2019 and 2020, CIRD proposed establishing a new reform model based on high-level opening-up, which aims to enhance China's role in international economic relations by integrating domestic



reform with the Opening-Up policy. In addition, during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, the CIRD proposed the concept of public health-first governance and assisted in formulating public health system reform policies. Lastly, in 2021, it proposed consumption-driven transformation as a new core pathway for economic development.

In this way, CIRD has responded to ever-changing economic and social needs of the country with robust research, providing essential recommendations and impetus for major reforms. By studying CIRD's experiences, valuable lessons can be drawn for important sectors that are relevant to Myanmar's current economic and social conditions.

First, priority should be given to land and rural security, which are the cornerstones of economic growth and social stability in Myanmar. Like China, Myanmar needs to provide legal and strong Security of Land Tenure, and it will be necessary to prioritize and support research and implementation efforts for agrarian reforms, including ensuring agricultural sector workers have access to necessary inputs at reasonable prices, reducing intermediaries, directly benefiting from their produce, and enabling direct market access.

The second is economic stability and financial sector reform. Addressing financial instability and banking sector challenges requires transforming banks into modern commercial institutions, effectively resolving Non-Performing Loans-NPLs, and adopting pragmatic policy guidelines to control inflation.

Third, as the national economy grows, class disparities should be reduced by strengthening public services and social welfare systems. Research and policies should support the establishment of a comprehensive social welfare system that guarantees basic public services such as healthcare and education for all citizens, including those in rural areas. These are among the key lessons derived from CIRD's experience.



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CIRD's success stems from the fact that all its research topics are consistently aligned with China's economic and political needs. Research evidence has been applied to formulate policies to promote the manufacturing and service sectors. Furthermore, CIRD also promotes regional cooperation and Open Policy through research and dialogues on agreements such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Myanmar's research institutions and think tanks should also collaborate more closely with ASEAN member states and take the lead in research on topics such as regional trade facilitation and cross-border investment.

CIRD was among the earliest institutions to advocate building a “public service-oriented government” model. Weak administrative mechanisms in countries often undermine investment and public trust. Implementing capacity-building and reform-related training programs for civil servants should be considered following CIRD's approach. At the same time, meritocracy and anti-corruption efforts must be pursued in tandem.

The success of CIRD is based on its operational model, which should be emulated to enhance the role of research institutes in Myanmar. Although CIRD maintains a small permanent staff, it operates on the model of “A Small Institution with Large-Scale Networks,” with a vast network of experts, government officials, and entrepreneurs. Myanmar's research institutions should expand cooperation with scholars in various fields from ASEAN, regional, and extra-regional research institutions. CIRD consistently provides forward-looking leadership for reform and practical solutions to the country's current challenges. Myanmar should also cooperate with other international institutions such as CIRD, UN ESCAP, ERIA, Mekong Institute, and the OECD Development Centre. CIRD's experience demonstrates that the importance of research institutes in the path of sustainable reform will play a significant role in developing Myanmar. The success of a country depends on the collaboration among



policymakers, researchers, and government officials. Therefore, research institutions that can think boldly about the future of the country and provide useful advice that is beneficial to the people, even to the government level, should be valued and strengthened. Only then can meaningful reforms be firmly advanced in the future. The concepts of reform also need to be innovative.

Moreover, due to CIRD's success, its researchers are invited as expert advisors to meetings led by Chinese political leaders and participate in drafting key policies, giving them strong direct involvement in policy decision-making. In Myanmar, there is also a need to build trust between the government and research institutions, and the recommendations of independent research institutions should be considered in the formulation of important national policies such as the National Economic Plan.

According to CIRD experts, over the past 34 years, CIRD has consistently adhered to the principle of “advising on reform and steadfastly adhering to reform.” It has continuously conducted systematic research and extensive dialogues on major strategic issues arising during China’s reform and opening-up process. In addition, it has provided necessary services for government policymaking and built consensus on reform. CIRD has cultivated reform-oriented scholars and driven efforts to promote the nation's reform and development. In operating its organization, CIRD has consistently adhered to the principle of “Organizational Management with Reform-Oriented Approaches.” By doing so, it strives to continue building itself as a leading think tank on China's reform.

Reform is not an external enemy; it is an internal ally. Reform means responding to changing circumstances in a timely and effective manner and preparing thoroughly to overcome future challenges. Reform involves anticipating potential risks and preparing to withstand them. I believe reform should be seen not as a foe, but as a friend.



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CIRD History Museum



China's 15th Five-Year Plan: Comprehensively Deepening Reform and High-Quality Development



Think Tank Report Release Seminar