

# Handling in the frontline: A case study of “whistle gathering” in Beijing

Shenghao Guo<sup>1</sup> | Bo Wen<sup>2</sup>  | Natalie Wai-Man Wong<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Management, Lanzhou University, Lanzhou, Mainland of China

<sup>2</sup>Department of Public Policy, City University of Hong Kong, Kowloon, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR)

<sup>3</sup>Department of Public Administration, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan

## Correspondence

Bo Wen, Department of Public Policy, College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, City University of Hong Kong, Room B-7324, Yeung Kin Man Academic Bldg, 83 Tat Chee Ave, Kowloon Tong, Kowloon, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR).  
Email: [wen.bo@cityu.edu.hk](mailto:wen.bo@cityu.edu.hk)

## Funding information

Start-up Research Grant of the City University of Hong Kong, Grant/Award Number: 7200652

## Abstract

The larger role that street-level bureaucracy has played in urban governance has been one of the focuses of public administration for several decades. This commentary presents a case study of whistle gathering (WG), which helps to eliminate the cooperative dilemma at the microlevel. As an innovative mechanism whereby organizational structures and communication systems are streamlined, WG occurs when departments/agencies convene and coordinate to participate in a joint task force in order to more efficiently respond to and solve every day problems at the community level. Underperforming participants are reprimanded and face administrative consequences. Since WG must meet certain prerequisites for successful implementation, policymakers and researchers are encouraged to further analyze the potential disadvantages of this system.

## KEYWORDS

Beijing, public service delivery, street-level bureaucracy (SLB), urban governance, whistle gathering (WG)

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

*Megacities with surging populations face many difficulties with regard to governance. For example, hospitals and schools are overcrowded, the easing of which falls into the purview of various departments at all levels. There is unregulated construction on residential streets and garbage is piled up everywhere. Huilongguan and Tiantongyuan, two extremely dense suburban neighborhoods in northern Beijing each with a population of 300,000, face the longstanding issue of a dearth of public services.*

This depiction not only reveals the dark side of Beijing (Zhu et al., 2018) but also illustrates the deficiencies of street-level bureaucracy (SLB) that can be found in many societies around the world (Hupe & Buffat, 2014; Lipsky, 2010). This alarming scenario is a reminder that the traditional mode of governance has fallen short with regard to providing basic street-level public services in rapidly-changing sociocultural and socioeconomic landscapes. We must remember that although bureaucrats who exercise power in their fields of expertise have a discernible impact on policy implementation and thus on the lives of citizens (Hjörne & Säljö, 2014), they commonly lack sufficient administrative discretion to handle frontline

problems themselves or to coordinate with higher-level departments under a predominantly rule-based system (Titmuss, 1971). In his examination of SLB, Lipsky (1980) suggests that citizens may find it difficult to deal with such officials due to the absence of stipulated rules and procedures. Moreover, many departments tend to pass the buck when it comes to handling challenges at the local level. This commentary thus focuses on how to motivate department officials to come together and solve street-level issues.

As an integral part of Beijing's recent “Betterment of SLB” project, whistle gathering (WG) (*Jiexiang chuishao, bumen baodao* 街乡吹哨、部门报到) is a response to the abovementioned challenges. It can be seen as a new type of mechanism for public service delivery at the street-level, a de-facto connector of citizens, local ward cadres (*Jiedao Ganbu*, 街道干部), and governmental institutions as well as a tool to help the general public receive prompt service from the corresponding department(s). Simply put, it enhances coordination between local sub-district governments and functional departments/agencies and provides a feasible solution to the limitations of SLB with regard to public service delivery. This novel institutional system may be beneficial when implemented in other non-routine service

areas such as emergency management and natural disaster preparedness. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, we have the WG system in Beijing to thank for the mobilization of resources from various departments/agencies for epidemic prevention and control, the prioritization of areas and neighborhoods in dire need of hygiene supplies and daily necessities, and the collection of firsthand, unvarnished public feedback on the government's performance in combating this raging crisis. Owing to these swift actions taken by the government after becoming aware of infection cases and responding to grievances from local communities (Renmin University's Joint Research Team [RUJRT], 2021), China successfully curtailed the spread of the coronavirus and saved millions of lives.

## 2 | CHALLENGES FACED BY STREET-LEVEL BUREAUCRATS

SLB epitomizes the dynamic interplay that takes place between citizens and governmental institutions (Soss et al., 2011). When residents speak up about community problems or neighborhood issues, SLBs are there to help them (Lipsky, 1980). Specifically, in China, *Jiedaoban*, a sub-district or local governmental office is responsible for addressing these problems (Pu, 1998). Ironically, although the primary function of *Jiedaoban* is to coordinate with the functional departments on management issues, their employees are not granted sufficient executive power to perform their duties. This mismatch between responsibilities and authority has led to the governance paradox that while bureaucrats are fully aware of frontline issues, they themselves cannot effectively solve the problems – particularly those that are crucial and ambiguous in nature.

Making matters worse, because many departments have overlapping responsibilities under the current governing structure in China, the general public and frontline bureaucrats are always perplexed about who they should contact to report issues. Due to the fact that they primarily work independently with only intermittent collaboration and communication, local departments tend to pass the buck which leads to inefficiency, making the whole process of problem-solving more time-consuming and costlier. Understandably, the general public often find themselves in a difficult, if not impossible, position when attempting to seek assistance from various departments when officials shirk their responsibilities.

From a theoretical standpoint, this unfortunate phenomenon is a manifestation of the principal-agent problem in a bureaucratic setting where, in a vertical sense, street-level bureaucrats (i.e., local ward cadres) are akin to “agents” who are entrusted by their administrative superiors to serve in the best interests of local communities (Lipsky, 1980). They can be powerful and influential during the process of decision-making (Hegele, 2018). However, on the horizontal level, poor bureaucratic coordination may constitute a formidable challenge against the rigid and ambiguous institutional contexts on the one hand, and the complex and rapidly changing real-world problems on the other (Li & Han, 2021). In theory, these bureaucrats are indeed entitled to unreserved

support from the functional department officials in their respective jurisdictions. While the latter are also expected to play the role of “agents” who are empowered by their higher-ups to address the needs and concerns arising from local neighborhoods, their performance is seldom monitored or critically evaluated partly due to the fact that Chinese top-down delegators and decision makers, unlike their Western counterparts, do not face (re)election pressure from constituents. As a corollary, local governmental department/agency employees often exhibit responsibility-dodging, risk-averting, and blame-avoidance behaviors when asked to help SLBs to solve problems (Lavee et al., 2018; Pepinsky et al., 2017). In order to break the status quo and resolve agency problems, there must be a clearer delineation of the responsibilities of functional departments/agencies and a redefinition and reallocation of the administrative power given to SLBs (Zarychta et al., 2020). Precisely for these reasons, the Chinese Central Government piloted the WG program in Beijing in 2018.

## 3 | THE INS AND OUTS OF WHISTLE GATHERING IN BEIJING

In short, the problem of government officials shirking their responsibilities has been gradually solved by streamlining public sector organizations, clarifying their responsibilities, and implementing WG programs (Meng et al., 2021). To a considerable degree, WG has broken China's inefficient administrative pattern by empowering employees working at the street level to assess the performance of higher-level officials, who are thus compelled to work in a more collaborative and effective fashion. Also, integrated enforcement platforms have helped identify and address problems in a much timelier manner.

Specifically, there are five steps involved in the mechanism of WG (see Figure 1), discussed below.

- i. **A problem occurs---** When residents experience difficulties, they can seek assistance directly from the street-level bureaucrats or call the 12345 hotline to lodge specific complaints. Then, the appointed officials analyze the problem and provide solutions.
- ii. **The problem is diagnosed----**After identifying the problem, the SLB either solves it independently or coordinates with relevant agencies/departments. In the latter case, representatives from these organizations are gathered/summoned to assist in solving the problems. In other words, the SLB plays the role of “whistle gathering (WG).”
- iii. **A coordination committee is set up---** During the above-mentioned process, the SLB is permitted to set up a working committee, which is nominally chaired by the head of the district government in the respective jurisdiction (i.e., party secretary). This is to ensure that the committee is granted a high administrative rank on paper so that its participating parties will undertake the assigned tasks seriously. In other words, by “gathering” administrators from relevant agencies or

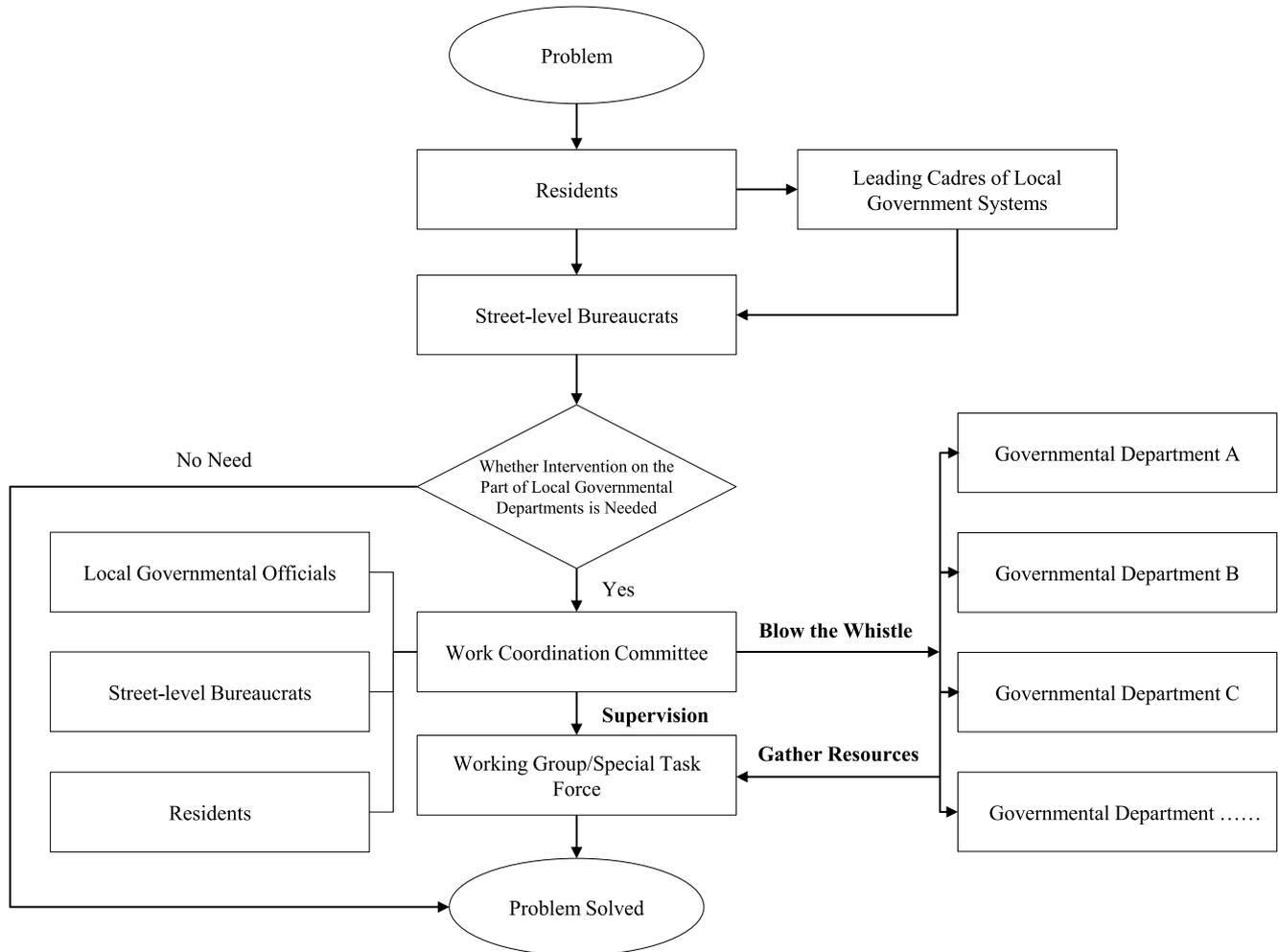


FIGURE 1 The process of “whistle gathering”

departments who genuinely wish participate, committees of this nature resemble a taskforce with unmatched resources capable of resolving complex neighborhood issues with ease.

iv. **Resolutions are provided**--- The coordination committee establishes a response mechanism under which relevant agencies or departments are asked to provide formal, coordinated, and feasible solutions for any given community issues on record. The SLB also establishes the time frame for solving the issues and methods for evaluating the results, which eradicates the root cause of the longstanding buck-passing phenomenon among many departments.

v. **Evaluations are performed**---After the problem is solved, another ad hoc committee that includes the SLB and local citizens of interest is formed to evaluate the effectiveness of the WG mechanism (Standing Committee of the Beijing Municipal People’s Congress, 2019). The involved departments or agencies are requested to give a blow-by-blow account to the committee of what they did to address the issue and reflect on the areas where improvements can be made. This evaluative exercise is seen by the higher-ups as a key indicator of agency performance. The heads of departments/agencies who are deemed to be

underperformers will be held personally accountable and subject to administrative repercussions.

After the implementation of WG in the first half of 2018, 127 local logistics centers were established in Beijing and 473 manufacturing enterprises were regulated. Moreover, according to the 12345 Beijing hotline, the number of calls from citizens praising the efforts made by the government increased by 17.37% from January to August 2018, while complaints and the reporting of problems in the neighborhoods decreased by 22.79% (Di, 2018). As of May 2021, hotline employees responded to over 20 million calls placed by citizens. Compared to the figures from last year, the success rate (namely, the percentage of successfully resolved cases to all received cases) soared from 53% to 86%, along with a satisfaction rating that went from 65% to approximately 90%. In their most recent publication, Meng et al. (2021) described the WG mechanism as a microcosm that reflects an ameliorated internal operating system of the Chinese bureaucracy. According to the results of their double differential analysis between piloted jurisdictions and their non-piloted counterparts at the township level, the WG reform has dramatically shortened

government agencies' average response time to more than 1.8 million hotline calls from citizens from 2017 to 2018, a conclusion that has withstood various robustness checks. Thus, these authors argue that the WG mechanism ought to be institutionalized and utilized nationwide to better convey public opinion, tackle community issues and concerns, foster citizen participation, and ultimately build trust and rapport between citizens and public administrators.

#### 4 | THE GUARANTEEING MECHANISM OF WG

In the last decade, the Chinese government has implemented a series of public management reforms in an effort to be more service-oriented, effective, transparent, and participatory (Tian & Christensen, 2019). Coming directly on the heels of those reforms, WG has yielded increased political accountability (Hupe & Hill, 2007; Lavee, 2021) and strengthened street-level public service delivery in China.

To summarize, WG is an innovative approach to local public service delivery in China because it helps to make the street-level bureaucrats more approachable in the eyes of local residents who may seek help at any time via the 12345 hotline. In addition, it is a powerful tool for coordinating the activities of government departments/agencies and for navigating the maze of inter-departmentalism. Moreover, it has increased responsiveness by forming a feedback loop within which the performance of involved government entities is appraised. Put differently, WG helps to more effectively address the every-day problems facing citizens by fundamentally minimizing the limitations of inter-departmentalism.

Admittedly, we must realize that the effectiveness of WG depends on the following conditions. First, SLBs must be granted sufficient administrative authority to bring government departments/agencies together and clarify and address the tasks at hand. The resultant demarcation of responsibilities thus makes it possible to ensure that the right person is assigned to the right task, which increases efficiency. Second, a task-oriented coordination group headed by local political elites plays an indispensable role in improving communication among governmental players. Lastly, given that administrative departments are mostly performance and incentive oriented, empowering street-level bureaucrats with the authority to gauge the performance of governmental institutions is of paramount importance to the prevention of the familiar buck-passing or silo behavior. Moreover, this will encourage interagency cooperation, initiate dialogue between citizens and governmental officials, and improve the effectiveness of urban governance as a whole. Needless to say, the continuing success of the WG to cure the bureaucratic pathologies within local service delivery hinges primarily on whether and to what extent its capacity to coordinate and evaluate remains uncompromised.

#### 5 | FURTHER SUGGESTIONS ON HOW THE WHISTLE GATHERING MECHANISM CAN IMPROVE PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY

*Be Wary of the Overuse or Misuse of WG*— Otherwise, it may ironically become a tool for street-level officials to avoid shouldering any individual responsibilities (Wang & Qiao, 2021). If this occurs, the problems they could have solved themselves may be mis-judged to need a “whistle,” possibly leading to frequent and wasteful “gathering” in streets. Thus, the municipal government should specify the circumstances under which inter-departmental coordination is warranted to enhance administrative efficiency (People's Government of Beijing Municipality, 2019).

*Set up a service center*— To minimize administrative costs incurred during the process of internal coordination, municipal government employees may consider setting up a service center to enhance efficiency. The center will partner with personnel from various departments to provide security, public transportation, food and medications, commerce and industry, fire service, municipal management, urban affairs, and housing. For example, some district governments in Beijing City have established such centers staffed with permanent representatives from major functional departments/agencies (General Office of Beijing Municipal People's Government, 2020) who judge whether community problems can be solved in-house and thus be handled immediately without implementing WG. Only if the problem merits attention and assistance from other departments which have no representatives working in the center, will this mechanism be deemed necessary.

*Using modern technology to lower the cost of and eliminate impediments to public participation and supervision*—The WG mechanism is often utilized only in response to citizen complaints that are serious. On this note, the general public should be encouraged to express their grievances early, which may enhance the effectiveness of WG. In addition, government employees may consider communicating with local residents via WeChat (the most popular social messaging application in China). Specifically, residents in each community would be invited to join an online chat group hosted and managed by a government liaison where they could inform leaders about community problems they face and find ways to solve them. Through WeChat and other similar apps, residents could also play an advisory role on certain city policies or livelihood projects by making in-person appointments with government officers (Municipal Service Administration of Beijing, 2020). Lastly, artificial intelligence can be incorporated into the 12345-hotline system to further augment the operational efficiency of WG. For example, residents – particularly the elderly – can more speedily leave comments and feedback through a speech recognition system. Government officials, knowing that their performance will be promptly assessed, will be more likely to be on their toes and work with SLBs to tackle the neighborhood issues at hand (Ma et al., 2020).

## 6 | EVIDENCE FOR PRACTICE

In his seminal work, Zang, (2017, p. 224) argues that government bureaus in China “suffer from closed-mindedness and the lack of inter-agency collaboration,” a phenomenon that should be carefully analyzed because internal cohesiveness is necessary not only to foster the nation's economic growth but also to secure the Communist Party's legitimacy. In reference to the following quote from a resident, “Officers from many departments fail to subjugate a pig [referring to an actual pig],” Zang laments in his fieldwork notes that the bureaucratic machine of China perfectly demonstrates its “inability to deal with every urban problem” (p. 224). He argues that the fundamental reason behind the lack of interdepartmental synergy is a long-held bureaucratic logic of “muddling through” –evading or shirking administrative duties to avoid making mistakes—as well as resorting to parochialism as a form of buck-passing for the sake of dodging responsibilities and risks. It must be noted that this type of thinking is not new and has been prominent in many developing countries and transitional economies around the world (Zarychta et al., 2020).

Fortunately, by reforming the organizational structure and the communication system as well as incorporating modern technology, WG has been used to solve the cooperative dilemma for street-level bureaucrats, allowing them to play a more significant role in public service delivery. Officials from the Central Government of China highly praised the implementation of this pilot program in Beijing, emboldening other provinces, such as Heilongjiang, Ningxia, Hubei, and Fujian, to adopt a similar approach (RUJRT, 2021). In the Longsha District of Qiqihar City in Heilongjiang, for instance, the Department of Urban Management delegated its personnel appointment and regulatory power to the street offices in each neighborhood, thus enabling the latter to set up an integrated law enforcement team to clarify the responsibilities of various functional subunits. This team was not only trained to consolidate the efforts from those subunits but was also empowered to assess the performance of related cadres with regard to encouraging their subordinates to work with other units to collectively solve local community issues (Zheng & Yao, 2020).

In conclusion, by virtue of WG, municipal services in Beijing are being provided more promptly and efficiently. To replicate this success by incorporating WG and reap the benefits of this flat management style, three conditions must be met. To begin with, offices must be set up to serve as sub-district branches of the local government and to handle local matters, such as the “regional center” in Tokyo, “Dong” in Seoul, and the “Jiedaoban” in China (Huang, 2019). Second, for the sake of enhanced coordination, municipal governments must be granted sufficient power to give street-level bureaucrats the authorization to assess the performance of higher-level departments. The Beijing Municipal Government, for example, has recently begun to institute the WG mechanism by promulgating laws in which the legislative purview of SLBs is laid bare (RUJRT, 2021). Lastly, messaging and social media apps (such as WeChat and Line) or an urban information system (e.g. Block Chain) should be utilized to

their fullest extent so that both governmental institutions and the public can report any potential problems and keep each other updated. Officers may also be informed of problem-solving assignments via this platform, and the public can post opinions and offer feedback about the results to help improve the effectiveness of urban governance over the long haul. If these prerequisites are met, we have confidence that WG will work well in other political contexts and related realms.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data used or mentioned to support the opinions expressed in this commentary are available upon reasonable request.

### ORCID

Bo Wen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2287-473X>

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