

THE PRACTICE COURSE, REALISTIC LANDSCAPE AND OPTIMIZATION PATHS OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN CHINA

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Abstract: Community is the basic unit of urban and rural social governance, and community development bears on the foundation of the modernization of China's state governance and on the well-being of the people. Since the reform and opening up, China's community development has undergone continuous evolution from community service to community building and then to community governance, achieving remarkable progress in the institutional system, the service system, the governance pattern and the workforce. On the basis of reviewing the theoretical foundations and policy context of community development, this paper systematically examines the realistic landscape of community development in China, analyzes in depth such prominent problems as the bureaucratization of grassroots self-governing organizations, insufficient resident participation, structural imbalance between service supply and demand, shortcomings of the workforce, the digital divide, and imbalances in urban and rural development, and then proposes path choices for promoting high-quality community development from six dimensions: upholding party-building leadership, clarifying the boundaries of rights and responsibilities, deepening digital empowerment, strengthening talent support, coordinating urban and rural development, and cultivating community consciousness, with a view to providing academic reference and practical implications for community development in the new era.

Keywords: Community development; Current situation; Existing problems; Improvement measures

1 INTRODUCTION

A community is a social life community formed by people living together within a certain geographical area. It is the meeting point of state governance and social governance at the grassroots level, and the most direct and tangible field in which people perceive their sense of gain, happiness and security [1]. Since the reform and opening up, along with the disintegration of the work-unit system, the acceleration of urbanization and large-scale population mobility, the grassroots social form of China has undergone profound changes, and the community has increasingly become the core unit for undertaking public services, resolving social conflicts and organizing residents' daily life [1-2]. In the new era, the Party Central Committee has placed grassroots governance in an important position in the governance of the country and has made a series of major decisions and arrangements. In 2017, the CPC Central Committee and the State Council issued the Opinions on Strengthening and Improving Urban-Rural Community Governance, which clearly states that "urban and rural communities are the basic units of social governance" [1]. In 2021, the Opinions of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on Strengthening the Modernization of the Grassroots Governance System and Governance Capacity further emphasized that grassroots governance is the cornerstone of state governance, and that coordinating the governance of townships (subdistricts) and urban-rural communities is a fundamental project for realizing the modernization of China's system and capacity for governance [3]. The report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China proposed to "improve the social governance system based on collaboration, participation and shared benefits and enhance the efficacy of social governance", pointing out the direction for community development [4].

On the theme of community development, a relatively rich body of scholarship has been accumulated. Some scholars, from the perspective of the relationship between state governance and community governance, hold that community governance is the concrete form of state governance at the grassroots level, and that the two evolve synergistically at the levels of goals, institutions and capacity; the modernization of community governance is both constrained by and supportive of the modernization process of state governance [1]. Some scholars examine the modernization of community governance from the perspective of Chinese logic, proposing that it consists of the modernization of the governance system and the modernization of governance capacity, with the main thread of change running from "management" to "governance" and from "coarse" to "fine" [2]. Still others focus on party-building leadership, advocating the construction of an urban-rural community governance system under the concept of combining autonomy and co-governance, so as to solve such problems as the bureaucratization of grassroots self-governing organizations [5]. These studies provide an important foundation for this research, yet systematic research that focuses on the overall picture of community development and runs through the historical context, realistic examination and path design remains to be deepened.

It should be noted that although China's community development has made considerable progress, in comparison with the overall requirements of the modernization of state governance and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life, community development still faces many shortcomings and challenges: the community governance structure needs to

be optimized, the institutionalized channels for resident participation are not yet well-established, the precision and balance of service supply need to be improved, the professional level of the community worker workforce needs to be strengthened, and the imbalance in urban-rural community development remains prominent [2, 5-6]. How to base community development on China's realities and better translate institutional advantages into governance efficacy has become a major theoretical and practical issue that needs to be addressed urgently.

Taking community development as its theme, this paper, on the basis of reviewing the theoretical foundations and policy context of community development, systematically summarizes the realistic achievements of community development in China, analyzes in depth the prominent problems currently faced, and puts forward targeted and feasible optimization paths. Combining policy text analysis with literature research methods, and balancing theoretical interpretation with realistic observation, this paper aims to provide a reference for research on community development in the new era.

2 THEORETICAL BASIS AND POLICY CONTEXT OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

2.1 Concept of Community and Community Development

The term "community" originates from the classic discussion of the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies. Tönnies understood community as an intimate community formed on the basis of blood ties, geographical proximity and common life, emphasizing the sense of identity, belonging and mutual assistance among its members [5]. In China, the concept of community has a distinct flavor of local practice. Some scholars point out that in the Chinese context, community is often understood as the smallest regional unit—the jurisdiction of residents' committees and villagers' committees—closely linked with the institutionalized grassroots organizational system; as a result, the phenomenon of emphasizing the "district" over the "community" and emphasizing administration over self-governance exists to a considerable extent [5]. From an academic perspective, community development refers not only to the construction and improvement of community infrastructure and the service system, but also to the enhancement of the degree of community organization, the level of resident participation and community consciousness. It is the unity of hardware construction and software cultivation, and a composite process of expansion in scope and improvement in substance, ultimately aiming to make community residents live more conveniently, comfortably and happily.

2.2 Theoretical Foundations of Community Development

Community development has rich theoretical origins. First, the theory of community. Marxism holds that the essence of human beings, in its reality, is the ensemble of all social relations, and that human interaction and association are important driving forces of social development; accordingly, the construction of community collectives is regarded as the extension and concretization of the social governance community at the grassroots level [6]. Second, governance theory. Governance emphasizes that multiple actors jointly manage public affairs through consultation and cooperation, as distinct from the top-down command and control of a single actor. Community governance is thus a process in which the government, the market, society and residents interact and co-govern under the leadership of grassroots Party organizations, with the core being to bring dispersed interest demands into the track of orderly participation and consultative dialogue [2, 6]. Third, the perspective of the synergistic evolution of state governance and community governance. Community governance is the concrete form of state governance at the grassroots level: it both carries the will of the state and institutional arrangements, and embodies the local characteristics and innovative vitality of grassroots communities; the two shape and evolve with each other at the levels of goals, institutions and capacity [1]. Some scholars further propose that the modernization of community governance consists of the modernization of the governance system, with institutional arrangements as its connotation, and the modernization of governance capacity, with the capacity of actors as its connotation, and that its logic of change is manifested in the transformation from "management" to "governance" and from "coarse" to "fine" [2]. Social capital theory emphasizes that trust, norms of reciprocity and networks of participation are important resources for sustaining collective action, while deliberative democracy theory advocates resolving differences and building consensus through open dialogue and rational consultation. Together, these theories show that community development is not only a process of improving material conditions, but also a process of reshaping governance structures, accumulating social capital and reproducing community identity. These theories provide analytical frameworks for understanding community development in China from different perspectives.

2.3 Policy Context of Community Development in China

China's community development has undergone a progressive course from community service to community building and then to community governance, resonating with the process of the modernization of state governance [1-2]. Since the 1980s, the civil affairs authorities have advocated that social welfare be run by society, promoted the rise of urban community services, and the role of subdistrict offices and residents' committees has become increasingly prominent. In the early 1990s, drawing on community development theories and China's realities, academia and practitioners put forward the idea of community building, and community services gradually expanded into comprehensive construction covering community public security, community culture, community environment and other contents. In 2000, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee forwarded the Opinions of the Ministry of Civil Affairs on Promoting

Urban Community Building Across the Country, which authoritatively defined the connotation of community and community building, and community building was fully launched in cities across the country [2]. The Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the CPC proposed to promote the modernization of China's system and capacity for governance, and community building thus shifted to community governance, with multi-stakeholder participation and consultative co-governance becoming the basic orientation [2, 5]. In 2017, the CPC Central Committee and the State Council issued the Opinions on Strengthening and Improving Urban-Rural Community Governance, the first time that urban-rural community governance was arranged in a dedicated document [1]. In 2021, the Opinions of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on Strengthening the Modernization of the Grassroots Governance System and Governance Capacity was issued, making systematic arrangements for strengthening the modernization of the grassroots governance system and capacity, and emphasizing the improvement of the level of socialization, rule of law, intelligence and specialization of grassroots governance [3]. Since then, supporting plans such as the 14th Five-Year Plan for the Construction of the Urban-Rural Community Service System have been implemented successively, and the institutional framework for community development has been increasingly improved [7].

3 MAJOR ACHIEVEMENTS AND REALISTIC LANDSCAPE OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN CHINA

3.1 The Party-Building-Led Institutional System Has Become Increasingly Sound

Upholding the Party's overall leadership is the fundamental guarantee for community development. In recent years, various localities have deepened party-building-led grassroots governance, improved the grassroots self-governance mechanism led by community Party organizations, and translated the Party's political and organizational strengths into governance strengths [3-4]. At the institutional level, the main framework of the grassroots governance system has been basically established: the leading core role of community Party organizations in governance has been continuously strengthened, mechanisms such as community consultation, openness of village (neighborhood) affairs and democratic supervision have been gradually improved, and a grassroots governance pattern featuring unified leadership of Party organizations, government performance of duties according to law, active coordination of various organizations and broad participation of the masses is being built at an accelerated pace [3, 5]. The institutional strengths of collaboration, participation and shared benefits have been continuously translated into governance efficacy. The cohesiveness and appeal of community Party organizations have been fully tested in major challenges such as epidemic prevention and control and emergency management, and the institutional efficacy of party-building leadership is increasingly evident.

3.2 Community Service Supply Capacity Has Been Significantly Improved

Community service is the core content of community development. During the 14th Five-Year Plan period, the construction of China's urban-rural community service system has accelerated across the board. Statistics show that the coverage rate of comprehensive service facilities in urban communities has reached 100%, and 80,000 meal assistance sites for the elderly have been built nationwide, with an elderly-care service network covering urban and rural areas initially taking shape [8]. Relying on community comprehensive service facilities, various localities have pushed service resources such as employment, elderly care, childcare, medical care, culture and sports down to the grassroots, creating convenient service circles that benefit the people, making it more convenient for residents to handle affairs and enjoy community life. Community services are accelerating their transformation from "whether they exist" to "whether they are good", and from basic guarantees to quality improvement. The precision and refinement of service supply have improved steadily, and an elderly-care service system based on home care, supported by communities and supplemented by institutions has been gradually improved, making communities an important carrier for weaving a tight network of livelihood security.

3.3 A Governance Pattern with Multi-Stakeholder Participation Is Taking Shape

Positive progress has been made in building the community governance collective. By the end of 2020, there were 509,000 villagers' committees and 113,000 residents' committees nationwide, with the system of grassroots self-governing organizations covering urban and rural areas [7]. At the same time, community social organizations have developed vigorously. By October 2024, there were about 2.7 million community social organizations of various types nationwide, which widely carried out charitable assistance, life services, community affairs, dispute mediation, cultural and sports activities, and have become an important force in community governance [9]. Grid-based management has been comprehensively implemented, and the linkage mechanisms among community Party organizations, residents' (villagers') committees, owners' committees, property service enterprises, community social organizations and residents have been continuously improved. Various localities uphold and develop the "Fengqiao Experience" in the new era, and rely on grid-based management and diversified mediation mechanisms to resolve conflicts and disputes at the grassroots level and nip them in the bud [3]. A community governance pattern of multi-stakeholder co-governance and benign interaction is taking shape at an accelerated pace.

3.4 Smart Community Construction and Digital Governance Have Advanced Steadily

Digitalization is an important direction for community development. In recent years, relying on technologies such as big data, cloud computing and artificial intelligence, various localities have accelerated the construction of comprehensive smart community information platforms, promoting the transformation of community governance and services toward digitalization and intelligence [7]. “Internet + community services” and “Internet + government services” have been rapidly popularized, and community grid management platforms, mechanisms for feedback on public sentiment, and risk early-warning systems have been gradually established, shifting community governance from experience-driven to data-driven. Some localities have explored “one-network unified governance” and “one-network universal handling”, integrating scattered grassroots service matters into a unified platform, and new forms such as online and cloud-based deliberation have expanded the channels for resident participation. Digital technology has significantly improved the efficiency and precision of community services and provided new carriers for residents’ participation in community affairs, continuously raising the level of intelligent community governance.

3.5 The Community Worker Workforce Has Continued to Grow

The community worker workforce is an important support for community development. By the end of 2020, there were 4.338 million community workers nationwide, 2.776 million members of village (neighborhood) committee leadership teams, and 1.573 million professional social workers [7]. The 14th Five-Year Plan for the Construction of the Urban-Rural Community Service System clearly put forward the development goal of having 18 community workers per 10,000 permanent urban residents by 2025, and various localities have continuously strengthened grassroots forces through recruitment, training and incentive measures [7]. The professional system for community workers has been continuously improved, salary and benefits and career development channels have been gradually standardized, and the level of professionalization has continued to rise, providing solid human resource support for community development.

4 PROMINENT PROBLEMS FACING COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN CHINA

4.1 The Tendency toward Bureaucratization of Grassroots Self-Governing Organizations

Residents’ committees and villagers’ committees are grassroots self-governing organizations. However, for a long time, influenced by institutional inertia, the tendency toward bureaucratization of residents’ committees has been relatively prominent; in fact, they have to a considerable extent become executive organs subordinate to subdistrict offices [5]. The relationship of guidance and assistance between subdistrict offices and residents’ committees can easily turn into a relationship of leadership and execution in practice: residents’ committees undertake a large number of administrative affairs, and their self-governance functions are compressed [5]. At the same time, the boundaries of rights and responsibilities between subdistricts and residents’ committees remain vague; the standards for compiling lists of rights and responsibilities differ across localities, with the number of items ranging from more than two hundred to more than one thousand, and the contradiction between the layer-by-layer delegation of administrative tasks and the reduction of burdens at the grassroots level has not yet been fundamentally resolved [5]. This tendency toward bureaucratization weakens the mass character and self-governance nature of self-governing organizations, encroaches on the time and energy of residents’ committees for carrying out resident self-governance and organizing community services, and constrains the generation of endogenous momentum for community development.

4.2 Insufficient Resident Participation and Weak Self-Governance Capacity

Residents are the subjects of community development, and resident participation is the lifeline of community governance. However, at present, the overall level of community resident participation in China remains low, characterized by weak willingness to participate, limited scope of participation and shallow depth of participation. A considerable number of residents regard the community as an administrative jurisdiction rather than a life community, take a wait-and-see attitude toward community public affairs, and their participation is mostly mobilization-based and task-based, with proactive and consultative participation relatively insufficient [6]. Collective action of the community collective faces realistic dilemmas: there is tension between the increasing heterogeneity of communities and the uniformity of policies; the value appeals and interest orientations of multiple actors are difficult to align completely; and there is a mismatch between service supply and residents’ needs—all of which objectively increase the difficulty of effective resident participation [6]. The organizational carriers and institutional channels for resident participation are still not well-established, and the mechanism for transforming participation outcomes into governance decisions is not smooth enough, constraining the sustained improvement of residents’ enthusiasm for participation.

4.3 Structural Imbalance in Service Supply and Uneven Resource Allocation

With the change of the principal contradiction in Chinese society, residents’ demands for community services have become increasingly diversified and quality-oriented, while the supply of community services still suffers from structural imbalance. On the one hand, the supply of high-quality services such as elderly care, childcare, medical care, culture and sports is insufficient to meet multi-level and diversified needs; on the other hand, there are obvious gaps in

resource allocation among different communities—old residential areas, areas inhabited by floating populations and communities of residents converted from rural to urban status have relatively weak service resources—and the contradiction between supply and demand in community services still exists [6]. The administrative way of thinking in community service supply has not yet been fundamentally reversed: the government does too much on its own while the mechanisms for market and social actors to participate in supply are not smooth enough, affecting the sustainability and professionalism of service supply. Some community service facilities emphasize construction over operation and hardware over software, with idle facilities coexisting with service gaps, constraining the actual efficacy of service supply.

4.4 Structural and Capacity Shortcomings of the Workforce

Although the community worker workforce has continued to grow in number, it still has structural and capacity shortcomings. First, the stability of the workforce is insufficient: the remuneration, career development channels and the heavy workload of community workers are not well matched, and staff turnover is relatively common. Second, the level of professionalization needs to be improved: community work involves multiple fields such as dispute mediation, elderly care, mental health and emergency management, yet the proportion of personnel with professional social work backgrounds and relevant certifications in the existing workforce remains relatively low. Third, administrative affairs crowd out service time: with “a thousand threads above and a single needle below”, community workers spend much of their energy filling in forms and receiving inspections and assessments, diluting the precise services delivered to residents. Talent problems are intertwined with the aforementioned problems of bureaucratization and insufficient participation, constituting a deep bottleneck constraining high-quality community development.

4.5 Digital Divide and Imbalance between Urban and Rural Development

While improving the efficacy of community governance, digitalization has also brought about new imbalances. Groups such as the elderly and the disabled face a digital divide; some residents find it difficult to adapt to digital scenarios such as online services and smart applications, and the connection between digital technology applications and age-friendly and accessible services needs to be strengthened. The imbalance in urban-rural community development remains prominent: the coverage rate of comprehensive service facilities in rural communities was 65.7% in 2020, still far behind that of urban communities, with the planning goal of raising it to 80% by 2025 [7]. Problems such as the shortage of rural community service personnel, the underdevelopment of social organizations and the scarcity of governance resources are intertwined, and some rural communities face the dual pressure of service demand and supply capacity brought by hollowing-out and aging; narrowing the urban-rural community development gap still requires sustained efforts.

5 PATH CHOICES FOR PROMOTING HIGH-QUALITY COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN CHINA

5.1 Upholding Party-Building Leadership and Building a Pattern of Collaboration, Participation and Shared Benefits

Party-building leadership is the fundamental political guarantee for community development. It is necessary to improve the grassroots self-governance mechanism led by grassroots Party organizations, run Party leadership through the whole process and all aspects of community governance, continuously strengthen the political and organizational functions of community Party organizations, and give play to the exemplary and vanguard role of Party members [4-5]. It is necessary to integrate governance resources with party-building leadership, promote benign interaction between government governance, social regulation and resident self-governance, improve the governance pattern featuring unified leadership of Party organizations, government performance of duties according to law, active coordination of various organizations and broad participation of the masses, and translate the institutional strengths of the social governance system of collaboration, participation and shared benefits into community governance efficacy [3-4]. It is necessary to uphold and develop the “Fengqiao Experience” in the new era, improve mechanisms for conflict screening, early warning and diversified resolution, push the governance gate forward and the focus downward, and ensure that communities are both full of vitality and stable and orderly [3].

5.2 Clarifying Rights and Responsibilities and Returning to Resident Self-Governance

The key to solving the problem of bureaucratization in community governance lies in clarifying rights and responsibilities and returning to self-governance. On the one hand, it is necessary to clarify the boundaries of rights and responsibilities between subdistrict offices and residents’ committees according to law, improve the access system for community work items, strictly manage the list of community matters, and adhere to the principle that authority, personnel and funds move with the tasks, so as to genuinely reduce burdens and increase efficiency at the grassroots level [5]. On the other hand, it is necessary to improve self-governance institutions such as residents’ meetings, meetings of residents’ representatives and consultative deliberation, and improve the mechanisms of democratic election, democratic consultation, democratic decision-making, democratic management and democratic supervision, so that residents’ committees and villagers’ committees truly become carriers for residents’ self-management, self-service,

self-education and self-supervision [3, 5]. Through empowerment and capacity-building, community governance should be pushed to shift from government monopolization toward benign interaction among government leadership, social coordination and resident self-governance, so that the institutional space and governance capacity of community self-governance improve in tandem.

5.3 Deepening Digital Empowerment and Bridging the Digital Divide

It is necessary to follow the trend of digitalization, deepen smart community construction, promote the deep integration of technologies such as big data and artificial intelligence with community governance, build intensive and efficient comprehensive smart community information platforms, and improve the precision and intelligence of governance [7]. At the same time, it is necessary to adhere to a people-centered approach, strengthen digital skills education and training, improve age-friendly and accessible information services, retain necessary offline service channels, and ensure that digital technology benefits all residents [7]. Digital empowerment is not simply moving governance online; rather, it should make technology better serve people's needs, prevent digital formalism, pay attention to data security and personal information protection, and truly realize "letting data run more and letting the masses run less", turning the digital dividend into residents' tangible sense of gain.

5.4 Strengthening Talent Support and Enhancing Professional Service Capacity

It is necessary to make the construction of the community worker workforce a foundational project of community development. The staffing standard of 18 community workers per 10,000 permanent urban residents should be strictly implemented, the mechanisms for the selection, training, assessment and incentives of community workers should be improved, their remuneration and professional prestige raised, and their career development channels widened, so that outstanding talents can be attracted, retained and developed [7]. It is necessary to intensify the training of professional social workers, promote community workers to work with professional qualifications, and enhance professional service capacities in dispute mediation, elderly care, mental health, emergency management and other fields. At the same time, it is necessary to coordinate the synergistic roles of social workers, volunteers and community social organizations, build a community service talent system combining full-time and part-time personnel with a reasonable structure, and drive the overall improvement of community governance with professional strength.

5.5 Coordinating Urban and Rural Development and Promoting Equalization of Community Services

It is necessary to uphold overall urban-rural planning, tilt community service resources toward rural areas, accelerate the improvement of the coverage rate of comprehensive service facilities in rural communities, and fill the shortcomings of rural community services [7]. Rural community construction should be advanced in light of local conditions, rural community social organizations should be cultivated, the rural mutual-aid elderly care service network should be improved, and community service models suited to rural realities should be developed, so as to promote the integrated development of urban and rural community services. Through standardized construction and equalized supply, the urban-rural gap in community development should be gradually narrowed, the further widening of the urban-rural divide in public service supply prevented, urban and rural residents enabled to share the fruits of community development, and the community foundation consolidated in the process of common prosperity.

5.6 Cultivating Community Consciousness and Stimulating Endogenous Momentum

The fundamental driving force of community development lies in residents. It is necessary to vigorously cultivate community culture, carry out activities such as neighborly mutual assistance, community volunteering and community consultation, enhance residents' sense of community identity and belonging, and shape the community spirit in which everyone is responsible, everyone fulfills their responsibility and everyone shares the benefits [4, 6]. It is necessary to improve the institutionalized channels for resident participation, improve participation platforms such as residents' councils and community micro-governance, and explore incentive mechanisms such as volunteer service points and the cultivation of community talents, so that residents strengthen their sense of ownership through participation. Through the cultivation of community consciousness and the improvement of participation mechanisms, community development should achieve an endogenous transformation from government promotion to resident co-construction, making communities truly the happy homes of residents.

6 CONCLUSION

Community development is a foundational project for promoting the modernization of China's system and capacity for governance, and an important carrier for continuously realizing the people's aspirations for a better life. Since the reform and opening up, China's community development has made remarkable achievements, with the institutional system, service system, governance pattern and workforce achieving an overall leap forward; at the same time, it faces realistic challenges such as weakened self-governance, insufficient participation, imbalance between supply and demand, talent shortage, the digital divide and the urban-rural gap. Solving these problems requires not only the continuous improvement of top-level design and the constant exploration of grassroots practice, but also the concerted

efforts of the government, society and residents. Looking ahead, we should adhere to the guidance of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, unite governance forces with party-building leadership, guarantee resident self-governance with institutional development, improve governance efficacy with digital technology, consolidate the foundation of development with talent support, promote balanced development with overall urban-rural planning, and stimulate endogenous momentum with community building, so as to continuously push high-quality community development to a new level and consolidate the grassroots foundation for building a modern socialist country in all respects.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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