

Exploring the Pathways of Social Work Participation in Rural Community Governance under the Background of Rural Revitalization: A Case Study of Village J in Sichuan Province

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Abstract: Confronted with rural decline and the long-standing imbalance of the urban-rural dual structure, the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China proposed the Rural Revitalization Strategy, which focuses on “thriving industries, livable ecology, civilized rural customs, effective governance, and prosperous life,” as well as the cultivation of a “rural” workforce that understands agriculture, loves rural areas, and cares for farmers. Social work shares a high degree of affinity with the Rural Revitalization Strategy in various aspects. This paper takes the practice of social work intervention in the rural revitalization of Village J in Sichuan Province as the research object, analyzes the professional logic of rural social work intervention in rural revitalization from the perspectives of value concepts, service models, and intervention methods, and finally proposes pathways to optimize rural social work in supporting rural revitalization from the dimensions of government, social organizations, and social workers.

Keywords: Rural Revitalization, Social Work, Rural Community Governance.

1. Introduction of the Issue

In the context of the new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics, the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China explicitly proposed the significant strategy of rural revitalization. This strategy not only signifies a new phase in China's rural development but also represents a comprehensive and multi-level construction project. It demands that we approach rural revitalization from new perspectives and with innovative ideas, promoting the revitalization of rural areas in terms of talent, industry, ecology, culture, and organization. This effort requires not only the guidance and support of the government but also the mobilization of the enthusiasm, initiative, and creativity of all sectors of society to form a new pattern of rural construction characterized by the participation of multiple stakeholders and the complementarity of their strengths.

To further strengthen the modernization of the rural governance system and governance capacity, the Rural Revitalization Strategy Plan (2018–2022) particularly emphasized the support for rural social organizations, especially those with service-oriented, public welfare, and mutual aid functions. These organizations play a vital role in the development of rural social work. Through them, we can better leverage the power of social forces to advance the in-depth implementation of the rural revitalization strategy. Moreover, the recently promulgated Opinions on Accelerating the Revitalization of Rural Talents and the Rural Revitalization Promotion Law of the People's Republic of China have further clarified the key role of rural social work in rural transformation and development, providing legal and policy guarantees for rural social work.

In practice, rural social work has already deeply participated in various aspects of rural revitalization from multiple fields, becoming an indispensable force in promoting the rural revitalization strategy. In summary, in the

context of the new era, rural social work is not only an important part of rural social construction but also a key factor in achieving the development goals of the rural revitalization strategy.

2. Feasibility Analysis of Rural Social Work Participation in Rural Revitalization

2.1. Historical Origins: The Mutual Promotion between Rural Social Work and Rural Construction

In the early 1930s, a large number of intellectuals, represented by Yan Yangchu and Liang Shuming, successively entered rural areas, attempting to modernize the then-backward Chinese countryside through educational means. Yan Yangchu led the North China Plain Education Movement, which piloted and promoted plain education in Ding County. Yan believed that the various social problems in China at that time, including those in politics and economics, were not spontaneously generated but originated from the people themselves [1]. Therefore, starting from a people-oriented perspective, he attributed the backwardness of Chinese rural areas to four fundamental issues: “ignorance,” “poverty,” “weakness,” and “selfishness.” He advocated that the content of rural construction should address these four issues through the “Four Major Educations,” namely, cultural education to combat ignorance, vocational education to combat poverty, health education to combat weakness, and civic education to combat selfishness.

Liang Shuming, on the other hand, launched the Rural Construction Movement in Zouping, Shandong. He argued that Chinese society at that time had a unique structure characterized by “ethics-based and occupation-separated” features. He viewed his Rural Construction Movement as a “reconstruction movement for a new organizational structure

of the national society.” Unlike Yan Yangchu’s emphasis on the “Four Major Educations,” Liang Shuming focused on the spiritual transformation of individuals, advocating for “spiritual cultivation” and emphasizing the importance of spiritual education for people.

Both the Ding County experiment and the Zouping experiment were social transformations conducted by intellectuals through educational means under the same historical context. Their goal was to invigorate the national spirit, improve the quality of the nation, and change the backward appearance of Chinese rural areas. These rural construction movements have provided valuable insights for the development of contemporary rural social work in China, particularly in terms of enhancing farmers’ capabilities and cultivating rural organizations, and have laid the foundation for the current rural revitalization efforts.

2.2. Theoretical Foundations: The Intrinsic Compatibility between Rural Social Work and Rural Revitalization

2.2.1. The Value Orientation of Social Work and the Essential Goals of Rural Revitalization

Social work is deeply rooted in the principles of social justice, respect, and care, emphasizing the empowerment of individuals and the enhancement of community well-being. These values align closely with the essential goals of rural revitalization, which aim to achieve comprehensive rural development, social harmony, and ecological sustainability. The rural revitalization strategy seeks to promote coordinated development of the rural economy, society, culture, and ecological environment through a series of integrated measures. The people-oriented, equitable, and harmonious principles embedded in this process resonate with the social work values of empowerment, community participation, and social integration. Both share a vision of a more inclusive, just, and prosperous society[2]. Therefore, there is a profound intrinsic connection and mutually reinforcing relationship between the value orientation of social work and the essence of rural revitalization.

2.2.2. The Professional Attributes of Social Work and the Service Approaches of Rural Revitalization

Social work, as a discipline characterized by strong professionalism and practicality, focuses on providing comprehensive and personalized services to individuals, families, and communities through scientific methods, professional skills, and ethical principles. This professional attribute is highly consistent with the service approaches advocated by rural revitalization. Rural revitalization also emphasizes the need to provide comprehensive and efficient services to rural residents based on a thorough understanding of local conditions, adopting targeted and context-specific strategies[3]. Both emphasize the importance of personalized and targeted services, the establishment of trust-based relationships, and the promotion of participation and cooperation to achieve the overall development of service recipients and the progress of rural society[4]. Therefore, from an academic perspective, the professional attributes of social work and the service approaches of rural revitalization are highly compatible in terms of concepts, methods, and goals.

2.2.3. The Practice Objectives of Social Work and the Purpose of a Service-Oriented Government

Social work, as a practice-oriented discipline, focuses on uncovering individual potential, repairing social relationships,

and upholding social justice. It aims not only to enhance the psychological well-being of individuals but also to promote the overall development of communities and the effective resolution of social issues through professional intervention strategies[5]. The realization of these goals relies on social workers providing comprehensive and personalized support and services to clients based on their professional knowledge, skills, and ethical frameworks.

A service-oriented government, as an important component of modern governance, aims to meet the growing needs of the people for a better life through efficient, transparent, and accountable public service delivery[6]. It emphasizes the transformation of the government’s role from a traditional manager to a provider and coordinator of services, focusing on building interactive and cooperative partnerships with the public. In this process, the government pays attention not only to the quantity and coverage of public services but also to their quality and public satisfaction, striving to create a fair, just, and harmonious social environment[7].

Therefore, the practice objectives of social work and the purpose of a service-oriented government have reached a consensus on multiple dimensions. Both emphasize people-oriented and equity-focused values, committed to enhancing overall social well-being and achieving sustainable development goals through professional services and governance approaches. This consensus not only provides a theoretical basis for their coordinated development but also offers valuable insights for the innovation and practice of social governance models.

3. The Practice of Social Work in Village J

3.1. Introduction to the Basic Situation of Village J and Community Services

Village J is located in the heartland of Sichuan Province, surrounded by mountains and water, and boasts picturesque natural scenery, representing a typical rural landscape of the Bashu region. The village is predominantly inhabited by two major family names, Li and Zhao, with a total of 150 households and a population of approximately 500 people. It is a community rich in local cultural characteristics. In recent years, with the acceleration of urbanization, Village J has faced challenges such as the outflow of young and middle-aged labor and an intensifying aging population. However, it also possesses abundant natural resources and a profound cultural heritage.

- **Aging Population:** The proportion of the population aged 60 and above in Village J is as high as 28%, and those aged 65 and above account for 18%, significantly exceeding the international standard for an aging society. This highlights the severity of the aging issue in the village.

- **Population Structure:** Similar to many rural communities, the majority of young and middle-aged individuals in Village J have migrated to urban areas for work or education. The village is now primarily composed of the elderly, children, and women left behind, forming a unique demographic structure.

3.2. The Practice Process of Social Work Intervention in Village J

Under the long-standing urban-rural dual structure, rural areas lag significantly behind urban areas in multiple dimensions. The village committee, as a bridge between the

town government and villagers, often focuses on implementing policies from higher authorities and tends to adopt a top-down management model to provide services. This model often fails to precisely meet the diverse actual needs of villagers, sometimes leading to irrational resource allocation and low service efficiency. Consequently, the "last mile" problem of community services remains unresolved for a long time, highlighting the urgency of community governance innovation. Meanwhile, despite significant progress in public infrastructure construction in Village J, the modernization of villagers' lifestyles and the increasing demand for spiritual and cultural fulfillment have led to an increasingly administrative and professional trend in the village committee's operations. Coupled with challenges such as lagging improvements in personnel capabilities, weakened internal cohesion of the village, and insignificant community governance outcomes, the work of the village committee has encountered a development bottleneck, and the continuous advancement of rural revitalization faces a lack of momentum.

It was against this backdrop that, thanks to the active guidance of the district civil affairs department and the personal generous funding from Secretary H, Village J became the first in the country to establish a village-level social organization. As a novel and independent force for village social services, the Y Social Work Institution transcends the administrative framework of the government and the village committee. Unbound by the traditional administrative system, it establishes cooperative relationships based on the resolution of common community issues and collaborates with all relevant parties. This innovative measure not only injected new vitality into the community governance of Village J but also opened up new pathways to address long-standing governance challenges.

In the typical rural society characterized by close-knit social ties, villagers are interconnected through strong geographical and kinship bonds, forming a complex and closely linked social network. Individuals are not isolated but deeply embedded in this network and its associated groups, sharing common values, customs, and lifestyles. When social workers first enter such a village built on familiar relationships, the primary and crucial task is to actively build good relationships with villagers through diverse means. This process requires social workers to proactively integrate and gradually penetrate the villagers' inner worlds through continuous interaction and communication, achieving a profound understanding and grasp of individual conditions, emotional needs, and the overall social network of the village. Only in this way can social workers effectively intervene in rural communities and lay a solid foundation for subsequent service provision and community development.

During the in-depth needs assessment phase, the resident social workers adopted a highly immersive strategy by living and working alongside villagers, deeply integrating into the daily life of the village. They conducted detailed household surveys through door-to-door visits and employed unstructured interview techniques to capture the true voices and needs of the villagers. This process not only enabled social workers to comprehensively understand the actual situation of the village but also effectively facilitated the initial and solid trust-building between social workers, villagers, and the village committee.

After completing the needs assessment, the resident social workers carefully planned and implemented a series of targeted activities based on the actual needs of the villagers.

They successfully extended their services to key areas such as the elderly, children and adolescents, and large-scale community events, initially creating a positive community atmosphere. Specifically, for the elderly, we launched WeChat learning groups and Happy Tumbleweed groups to help them bridge the digital divide and enhance their physical and mental health. For children and adolescents, we established an After-School Tutoring Program, providing space for extracurricular tutoring and interest development. Additionally, we organized a variety of community-wide events, including a Karaoke Competition, a Fishing Festival, and a Charity Public Welfare Festival. These activities not only enriched the spiritual and cultural lives of the villagers but also strengthened community cohesion and centripetal force, initially demonstrating the positive outcomes of community building.

3.3. Intervention Outcomes

When exploring the professional capabilities of social work, its core strengths are prominently reflected in the cultivation and optimization of interpersonal relationships, as well as the bridging role in strengthening connections between individuals and groups, especially the close ties among villagers within the community. In the specific practice in Village J, social workers, based on detailed needs assessments, built comprehensive interpersonal networks. They always took the actual needs of villagers as their guiding principle and starting point, centered on the community, and through carefully planned and diversified activities, flexibly employed various strategies to stimulate and deepen interactions and cooperation among villagers. This improved their relationships, enhanced mutual connections and dependencies, and gradually established solid social networks and group structures.

In this process, as villagers collectively faced challenges and resolved issues of concern, they not only enhanced mutual understanding and support but also cultivated a strong sense of community identity and belonging, naturally giving rise to collective action. Village J gradually evolved into a harmonious community characterized by neighborly warmth, mutual assistance among villagers, high community participation, and solid trust among people. It is particularly noteworthy that with the in-depth involvement of professional services, the village regained its long-lost vitality. The cultural and artistic potential of the villagers was fully unleashed, and their attitude towards social workers shifted from initial unfamiliarity to sincere recognition and trust. The role of social workers also subtly transformed from mere service providers to partners working alongside villagers and indispensable supporters of the village committee. In this transformation, social workers not only identified and nurtured proactive villagers but also helped the rise of community leaders. Meanwhile, social workers' understanding of their own role positioning became increasingly clear, and their positive role in the broader context of rural revitalization became more prominent, laying a solid foundation for the in-depth implementation of the rural revitalization strategy.

4. The Professional Logic of Rural Social Work in Rural Revitalization

4.1. Value Orientation: Commitment to Endogenous Rural Development

The fundamental purpose of social work professional services is to "help people help themselves," which is also one of the core values of the social work profession. When breaking down the concept of "helping people help themselves" into "helping" and "self-help," the former represents the means, while the latter is the ultimate goal. In other words, through the collaboration of social workers, helping people help themselves aims to enable service recipients to gain the ability to be self-reliant and independently cope with life's challenges.

The concept of helping people help themselves is deeply rooted in Chinese culture and is an extension of the ancient Chinese adage "Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime." It is also highly consistent with the contemporary advocacy for "endogenous development." Endogenous development originated from the social development plans implemented by UNESCO around 1980, which emphasized the importance of social and cultural conditions, value systems, and the participation motives and methods of community members in development. This new development concept is significantly different from the then-dominant exogenous development approach. Endogenous development emphasizes a people-centered and locally participatory approach. Early endogenous development theories included the concept of "selective separation," opposing external development and advocating reliance on internal forces within a region rather than external forces to achieve development. Of course, adhering to endogenous development does not mean completely rejecting external assistance but rather emphasizes reducing over-reliance on external resources and forces, advocating for development based on one's own internal motivation and capabilities.

In fact, rural revitalization is a process of rebuilding the social subjectivity of rural areas. The development of rural social work needs to abandon the previous government or market "blood transfusion" approach and uphold the value of helping people help themselves. It focuses on cultivating the endogenous capabilities of farmers and even entire villages, empowering them to ignite the internal motivation to change themselves and the overall appearance of their villages. Once the subjectivity and capabilities of farmers are developed, rural development can shift from exogenous to endogenous development, thereby achieving sustainable rural development.

4.2. Service Model: Integration through "Embedding"

The Western concept of embeddedness commonly translated as "embedding," "embeddedness," or "embedding theory," with a few scholars opting for "engraving." The original meaning of "embedding" refers to the organic integration of one system into another, manifesting as the phenomenon of one entity being endogenous to another. Later, scholars used this concept to express the inseparable relationship between organizations and their environment, or between organizations and other organizations or environments. Regarding the development path of social

work in China, Professor Wang Sibin once mentioned the concept of "embedded development" and provided a concise explanation of its content and evolution. Additionally, many scholars believe that the embedded development model of social work in China mainly includes types such as bidirectional embedding, bidirectional empowerment, and reverse embedding. This paper argues that embedding is merely a means or a process, while integration is the ultimate goal.

Currently, the awareness and recognition of rural social work in rural areas in China are relatively low, especially in the underdeveloped western regions. Rural social work participation in rural governance is primarily manifested in the form of social organizations. As external social organizations, they face the challenge of "difficult embedding," mainly characterized by difficulties in entering, implementing, and taking root. To address these challenges and achieve integrated development in rural areas, social organizations need to construct legitimacy from the following three aspects:

- Identity Construction: Local government departments can issue policy documents and supportive institutional mechanisms to grant social organizations the legitimate identity to participate in rural revitalization, thereby solving the problem of entry difficulties for social organizations.

- Social Construction: Chinese society is a relational society based on kinship. Against the backdrop of rural China, the primary challenge for social workers is to establish a trust relationship in the process of service delivery and daily interactions with clients. This trust is similar to interpersonal trust but distinct from purely interpersonal trust. Only by integrating into rural life, closely connecting with villagers, and conducting "local" services can social workers gradually expand the boundaries of trust, find practical spaces for providing precise and refined services to farmers, and thus address the issue of implementation difficulties.

- Value Construction: Social work is a profession rooted in the Western cultural knowledge system, and social work values are the soul of the profession. Social workers cannot simply copy Western social work value concepts. Instead, they should adhere to local theories of collectivism and humanistic care to construct a people-centered, localized social work value system that is widely accepted and recognized by rural residents, thereby solving the problem of taking root difficulties.

4.3. Intervention Methods: Combining Service with Transformation

The ecosystem theory evolved from general systems theory. This theory views the social environment in which humans grow as a social ecosystem, emphasizing the significant impact of the social environment on individuals' perceptions and behaviors. Social work service recipients are typically vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in society. From an ecosystem perspective, the causes of clients' difficulties stem from both individual and social environmental factors. The definition of these causes directly affects the intervention methods that social workers adopt, which include both micro-level services targeting individuals and macro-level transformations targeting the social environment, both of which are indispensable.

Services provided to individuals should adhere to a strengths-based perspective, deeply exploring and stimulating their internal resources and potential to enhance their personal

capabilities while avoiding overly medicalized or therapeutic service orientations. From a macro perspective, rural social work must closely focus on the core of "community needs" and strive to promote positive changes in the overall rural environment. Poverty reduction and development are not only the noble missions of the social work profession, but also the fundamental approach to addressing the root causes of poverty. While individual case assistance for the poor can temporarily alleviate difficulties, only the sustainable prosperity of the community can achieve long-term solutions. Currently, the strategic focus of rural construction has successfully transitioned from poverty alleviation to rural revitalization. This requires rural social work to establish a new positioning that fundamentally aims to promote comprehensive rural progress. In this process, we should adopt an asset-based perspective, viewing various elements within the rural environment as valuable resources. By activating and efficiently utilizing these resources, we can inject vitality into rural revitalization.

According to the conventional analytical framework, the unique socio-cultural characteristics of rural areas constitute an indispensable contextual background for rural revitalization, covering five dimensions: political, economic, cultural, ecological, and social. Against this backdrop, rural social workers should flexibly employ community social work strategies and methods, focusing on asset building and actively engaging in comprehensive practices such as rural industrial revitalization, talent cultivation, organizational optimization, cultural prosperity, and ecological protection. The goal is to comprehensively enhance the development level of rural areas and ultimately achieve the "five-in-one" sustainable development blueprint of political integrity, economic prosperity, social harmony, cultural flourishing, and ecological well-being.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Macro-Level: Strengthening Policy and Institutional Frameworks by the Government

5.1.1. Enhancing Policy Guidance and Support

The government must further strengthen the formulation and implementation of policies and institutions to lay a solid foundation for social work participation in rural community governance. Specifically, the government should deepen policy guidance and support mechanisms by introducing more precise and comprehensive policy measures. These measures should clarify the positioning, responsibilities, and rights of social work in rural community governance, providing policy incentives and resource guarantees for social work organizations and professionals. Additionally, the government should enhance the supervision and evaluation of policy implementation to ensure that policies are effectively implemented, creating a top-down policy push to stimulate the enthusiasm and creativity of social work in rural community governance. Moreover, the government should establish and improve inter-departmental cooperation mechanisms to promote the coordinated action of policies and institutions, jointly driving the modernization of the rural community governance system.

5.1.2. Improving the Social Work Service System

Improving the social work service system is a key pathway for social work participation in rural community governance

under the context of rural revitalization. This requires a multi-faceted approach:

- First, it is necessary to build a comprehensive and fully functional social work service network to ensure that rural communities have access to convenient and efficient social work services.

- Second, efforts should be made to strengthen the construction of a professional social work talent pool. This can be achieved through education and training, talent recruitment, and other means to enhance the professional quality and service capabilities of social workers, providing a solid talent support for rural community governance.

- Third, the deep integration of social work with rural community governance should be promoted. Social work concepts and methods should be integrated into every aspect of rural community governance to foster innovation and optimization of governance models.

- Finally, a robust assessment and feedback mechanism for social work services should be established to continuously optimize service processes and content, thereby improving service quality and effectiveness.

5.2. Meso-Level: Strengthening Internal Management and Professional Service Capacity of Social Organizations

5.2.1. Improving Internal Management Systems

Social organizations, as important vehicles for social work participation in rural community governance, must focus on internal management and professional service capacity building. First, improving internal management systems is the foundation for social organizations to enhance operational efficiency and service quality. This includes establishing sound regulations, clarifying job responsibilities, and optimizing decision-making processes to ensure standardized and scientific internal management. Additionally, financial management and supervision should be strengthened to ensure the transparency and efficiency of fund utilization, providing a solid guarantee for the smooth implementation of social work services. Moreover, attention should be paid to talent cultivation and team building. Professional training and incentive mechanisms can be used to enhance the professional quality and comprehensive capabilities of social organization members, injecting new vitality and momentum into rural community governance.

5.2.2. Enhancing Professional Service Capacity

Enhancing the professional service capacity of social organizations is essential for their effective participation in rural community governance under the context of rural revitalization. This requires social organizations to keep pace with the times, deeply understand the actual needs and issues of rural communities, and continuously improve their professional skills and knowledge. Specifically, social organizations should strengthen external cooperation with universities and research institutions to introduce advanced theories and methods, enriching the content and forms of services. At the same time, through case analysis and experience sharing, the professional quality and practical abilities of team members should be continuously improved to ensure that services accurately address the pain points of rural community needs. Additionally, social organizations should focus on assessing and providing feedback on service effectiveness, promptly adjusting service strategies, and optimizing service processes to provide more efficient and

professional support.

5.2.3. Strengthening Credibility

Strengthening the credibility of social organizations is an indispensable part of the effective participation of social work in rural community governance. Credibility is the cornerstone of the survival and development of social organizations and directly affects their ability to gain the trust and support of villagers. Therefore, social organizations should adhere to the principles of openness, transparency, and integrity, establishing a sound information disclosure mechanism. They should promptly disclose service content, fund flows, project progress, and other information to villagers, enhancing their sense of participation and supervisory rights. Additionally, through high-quality service outcomes, active community interaction, and feedback collection, the satisfaction and recognition of villagers towards social organizations should be continuously improved. Moreover, social organizations should focus on their own brand building, establishing a positive image and spreading positive energy to further consolidate and enhance credibility and contribute more to rural community governance.

5.3. Micro-Level: Social Workers Promoting the Implementation of Professional Social Work in Rural Areas

5.3.1. Rooting in Rural Grassroots

Social workers, as direct drivers of rural revitalization, play a role in promoting the true implementation and deep integration of professional social work in rural society. First, social workers need to deeply root themselves in rural grassroots areas. Through long-term village residence, visits, and research, they should comprehensively understand the actual situation of rural society and the real needs of villagers. They should actively integrate into rural life, build deep emotional connections with villagers, and become trusted friends and partners. On this basis, social workers should use their professional knowledge and skills to provide precise and personalized services to rural communities, solving the actual problems faced by villagers and enhancing their sense of gain and happiness. Additionally, social workers should actively advocate and cultivate the self-governance capabilities of rural society, guiding villagers to participate in community governance and jointly build a harmonious and beautiful rural society. Through these efforts, social workers can not only take root in rural society but also stimulate its internal vitality and promote the in-depth implementation of the rural revitalization strategy.

5.3.2. Delivering High-Quality Social Work Services

Under the context of rural revitalization, social workers must strive to deliver high-quality social work services to support rural community governance. This requires social workers to have a solid foundation in professional theory, rich practical experience, and keen insight. They should closely integrate the actual situation of rural society and the diverse needs of villagers to design and implement feasible service projects and activities. During the service process, social workers should adhere to a people-oriented approach, paying attention to the individual differences and needs of service recipients, and provide personalized and precise service plans. Additionally, they should actively introduce advanced service technologies and methods, such as digital and intelligent means, to improve service efficiency and quality. By delivering high-quality social work services, social workers can not only meet the actual needs of villagers but also gain their trust and support, laying a solid mass foundation for rural community governance.

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