

Cause Analysis of Dilemma of Emergency Management and Adding Code Layer by Layer under Public Health Emergencies -- Taking the Implementation of the Policy of Returning Home from the COVID-19 Pandemic as an Example

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Abstract. As a major public health emergency, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic is a big challenge for emergency management ability. This paper holds that the emergency management dilemma faced by local governments at all levels and the logic in the implementation of the policy of returning home are as follows: the tension between emergency management ability and pandemic prevention demand at the macro level leads to the excessive pandemic prevention pressure of local governments. At the micro-level, the imbalance between the ability and quality of government officials and the pressure of internal and external subjects also gives birth to the phenomenon of avoiding responsibility and lazy administration. It is embodied in the pressure of policy transmission from the central government, the criticism of the public opinion, the distorted view of achievements of members of bureaucratic organizations, and the lag of pandemic prevention technology. In order to minimize the negative impact, a moderate adding code layer by layer may better help realize the policy value.

Keywords: public health emergencies; emergency management; policy implementation; adding code layer by layer.

1. Introduction

In January 2022, an official in Dancheng county, Zhoukou City, Henan Province, said in an interview with the media: “Anyone who does not comply with the control regulations of pandemic prevention in Henan Province, cities and counties, does not listen to dissuasion, and maliciously returns to hometown, as long as he or she returns, he or she will be quarantined before being detained. The purpose of this statement is to ensure the safety of the masses.” However, according to the latest requirements of the pandemic prevention and control institutions in Henan Province at that time, only in principle, encourage people to celebrate Chinese New Year in their places of residence and work. People returning to Zhengzhou from middle-high risk and related areas should be distinguished based on different situations and implement measures such as quarantined medical observation, health monitoring, and nucleic acid detection according to community requirements. Once this kind of local government’s behavior of adding code layer by layer was exposed, it caused a public outcry. The topic “malicious returning home” quickly rushed to the hot search and became a hot word on the Internet. However, no one could have expected that this was only the beginning. In the next six months, various local governments’ adding code layer by layer measures continued in an endless stream, and all kinds of unreasonable incidents occurred constantly, which not only seriously hindered the process of our government’s fight against the COVID-19 pandemic but also greatly reduced the credibility of the government, resulting in extremely serious negative impacts.

Although from January 2022, the National Development and Reform Commission and other 14 departments issued *Opinions on Doing a Good Job in Spring Festival Travel Rush in 2022*, which emphasized scientific and accurate travel management in different districts, resolutely prevented the policies of *one size fits all* and *adding code layer by layer*, so as to reduce the impact on people’s production and life. However, until June 3rd, the comprehensive group of the State Council’s response to COVID-19 pandemic prevention control mechanism still put forward clear requirements to all cities: all cities should convey and implement the pandemic prevention and control policies for

students leaving school and returning home step by step, and must not add code layer by layer. What can be seen is that during the pandemic period, the behavior of adding code layer by layer by local governments was spurned by the public, and the Chinese central government has been prohibiting it. However, the repeated emphasis still cannot effectively curb its emergence. As a matter of fact, the reason for the adding code layer by layer behavior of local governments in emergency management is not a coincidence, but it is formed under the joint promotion of various factors. Clarifying the logic behind the phenomenon of adding code layer by layer will help us to fully understand the causes of this phenomenon and the dilemma of government emergency management.

2. Cause Analysis of Dilemma of Emergency Management and Adding Code Layer by Layer

Through literature review and further analysis, it is not difficult to see that the Chinese government's emergency management dilemma in dealing with public health incidents is mainly reflected in the following aspects:

2.1 Macro-level: The tension between Emergency Management Ability and Pandemic Prevention Needs

From the macro level, behaviors such as adding code layer by layer that clearly violate the emergency management policy and principles are common and repeatedly prohibited, which reflects the imbalance between the construction of local government emergency management systems and the increasing demand for pandemic prevention during the COVID-19 pandemic.

On the one hand, China's emergency management started late in general. Although the relevant research is in the period of quality improvement at this stage, compared with the developed countries in Europe and America, where the emergency management system was complete in the middle and late 20th century. It was not until January 8th, 2006 that the State Council issued the *General Emergency Plan for National Public Emergencies* that the framework system of China's emergency plan was initially formed.[1]. Up to now, there is still a big gap between the overall level of emergency response and that of developed countries, the relevant systems and mechanisms still need to be further improved, and the prevention and control and early warning technologies also need further improvement.

On the other hand, the relevant research and practical experiences in emergency management of public health emergencies are not rich. Although the fight against SARS in 2003 exposed many shortcomings in our government's emergency management, the theoretical research on emergency management of public health emergencies got new development. On May 7th, 2003, the promulgation and implementation of the *Emergency Regulations for Public Health Emergencies* also marked that the relevant emergency management work had been comprehensively strengthened and promoted by the government. However, after 2008, the research and practice of emergency management in China are more inclined to natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, and droughts. At the same time, compared with other countries in the world, especially the United States, which has experienced the H1N1 swine flu pandemic, West Nile encephalitis, monkeypox virus, and several anthrax incidents successively, the experience of public health emergencies is fewer, and the practical response experience in this respect is also relatively lacking. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a major public health emergency with the fastest spread, the widest infection range, and the most difficult prevention and control since the founding of the People's Republic of China, which poses a severe challenge to the emergency management ability of the Chinese government. Therefore, even today, when the pandemic situation has been effectively controlled and pandemic prevention has become normal. The level of emergency management shown by local governments is not balanced, lacking effective epidemic prevention means, and the level of emergency management construction has not played a very effective role in prevention and control, but there is a certain tension.

2.2 Micro-level: The Imbalance between the Ability and Quality of Officials and the Pressure from Internal and External Subjects

The reason for the frequent occurrence of the phenomenon of adding code layer by layer is more closely related to the actions of local governments, the main body of emergency management in this pandemic, besides the unbalanced environment of emergency management construction and health and pandemic prevention demand. As far as the government is concerned, the reasons leading to the predicament can be roughly summarized into the following two aspects:

2.2.1 The external influencing factors

(1) Policy transmission pressure

Under the influence of the political system, at present, China's specific work to deal with public health emergencies is mainly carried out under the general leadership of the CPC Central Committee and the efforts of local governments at all levels, so as to achieve the goal of "to prevent the coronavirus from re-entering the country to cause a new epidemic" in fighting the pandemic. Any local government's "dropping the ball" behavior in the pandemic prevention process will cause systematic failure. Therefore, for the emergency management of local governments, it is essential to receive and implement the policy instructions from the central government in time. However, due to the contradiction between the sudden occurrence of public health events and the lag of policy transmission, the central government's policy has passed through all levels of government in the process of transmission, wasting a certain amount of time, and it is difficult to cope with the rapidly changing epidemic situation. For timely emergency management, information asymmetry and slow transmission may bring extremely serious consequences.

In addition to the lag problem, local governments often have some problems of distortion in conveying policies to lower-level governments. This kind of distortion is not certain. In the process of communication, local governments need to adjust, supplement and improve the policies according to the local pandemic situation. Even some governments will give some effective instructions to lower-level governments considering the delay of policy transmission. Therefore, the content of the original policy is not completely consistent from time to time. Thus, in reality, in order to avoid mistakes in the work of lower-level governments, the higher-level government implicates itself, changes the original content of the policy too much, and adds a lot of its own requirements. If this is the case at all levels, finally, the policy instructions received by the grassroots government will be seriously distorted. Affected by this, it is difficult for local governments at all levels to fully and accurately understand the policy ideas of the CPC Central Committee, so they cannot flexibly adjust the emergency management at this stage.

Recently, some scholars have summarized the new responsibility system with accountability as the core from the perspective of the relationship between the central government and the local government.[2] That is, the higher-level government formulates vague policies, provides more discretion for lower-level governments, and reserves the right to supervise and assess the results. However, in the process of fighting against the COVID-19 pandemic, the higher authorities, especially the central government, paid too much attention to and focused on the number of infected people, which led to the implementation of alienation under the pressure system in the application of discretion by local governments.

(2) The pressure of the accountability system

As early as the beginning of the 21st century, some scholars have conducted in-depth research on the relationship between the phenomenon of adding code layer by layer and the promotion of officials[3]. The scholar Zhou Lian pointed out that "The root of the phenomenon of adding code layer by layer lies in China's administrative system of multi-level subcontracting and multi-level promotion tournaments for officials" in his three articles, that is, *Incentive and Cooperation of Government Officials in the Promotion Game: On the Causes of Long-standing Local Protectionism and Redundant Construction in China*, *Research on the Promotion Tournament Model of Local Officials in China*, and *Local Governments in Transition: Incentive and Governance of Officials*:

Even though many years have passed, this conclusion is appropriate in government emergency management.

In fact, whether it is a public health event such as the COVID-19 pandemic, a natural disaster such as floods, or a production safety accident, once all kinds of sudden public events occur in their jurisdictions, government officials, especially those who want to be rewarded and promoted for their work, whoever is responsible for the territory under territorial management will make the officials who have an outbreak in their jurisdiction fall into the predicament of being held accountable. Some scholars have pointed out that during the period of implementing regular epidemic prevention and control measures in COVID-19, the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in any place will lead to the local responsible officials being punished to varying degrees. "Those who are in a light level will be given a severe disciplinary warning within the party, and those who are in a heavy level will be dismissed from their posts and administrative positions within the party."

However, at present, there are still obstacles to the implementation of the accountability system for officials in China. Because some local governments at all levels and government departments are not clear enough about their related responsibilities and authority, the relevant departments will shirk and wrangle with each other when pursuing their responsibilities[4]. In addition, the legal system of official accountability is not perfect. The official accountability system of administration is not supported by the corresponding legal system, which often leads to uncertainty in the implementation process. In the public cases so far, the responsibilities, punishments, and accountability procedures of others other than the main leaders have not been explained to the public. Under the pressure of this accountability system, for local governments at all levels, the best way to implement emergency management is to stifle the possibility of any sudden public events, so that some principal officials can meet the most basic demand of not being held accountable, and other personnel will also be free from leadership pressure, thus forming a behavioral change from taking credit to avoiding responsibility[5]. Under the influence of this negative strong incentive on the punishment of default behavior[6], the behavior of adding code layer by layer, which does not concern with the public thoughts, has become the dependence of some people on keeping their jobs. Therefore, to a large extent, it can be said that the accountability mechanism for officials' inaction has not been perfected, which has led to the phenomenon of adding code layer by layer repeatedly.

(3) The pressure of public opinion

In the Internet age, new media such as WeChat, Weibo, and micro-video are widely popularized, which speeds up the spread of all kinds of information, broadens the channels of communication, and opens up an exchange platform for the public to express their personal opinions and thoughts. Under this influence, the attention and supervision of public opinion on government work has also been raised to an unprecedented height. As far as the government is concerned, in the process of COVID-19 pandemic prevention and control, it can bring positive benefits to the smooth development of epidemic prevention by reasonably guiding public opinion, using the information dissemination characteristics of the Internet and new media to strengthen the propaganda of epidemic prevention knowledge, eliminating public panic and dispelling rumors. However, it should be noted that while making use of public opinion, the government also bears extensive pressure from public opinion.

On the one hand, in the information age, all countries are faced with the dilemma of "secondary public opinion from the Internet gradually reduces the influence of official mainstream public opinion", which will inevitably bring troubles to the government's work. Especially in the event of major public emergencies, some public opinions on the Internet will always maintain amazing consistency, that is, questioning, denying, and even attacking the government's emergency management decisions and behaviors without knowing the specific situation. Although some of them were later proved to be true, a large number of unfounded negative comments often required the government to allocate some people to investigate, clarify and feedback, so that the crowding of resources would exert pressure and obstacles on the emergency management work carried out at the present stage. On the other hand, it is normal for the government to be pressured by public opinion in emergency management, but compared with ineffective epidemic prevention, local governments are

obviously more willing to accept the evaluation of excessive epidemic prevention. As a result, some local government departments generally have the idea of compromising public opinion or the application of the idea of the bottom line of public opinion. In the epidemic situation, when the government thinks that it cannot effectively warn and prevent the spread and outbreak of the epidemic, and adopts the behavior of adding code layer by layer to cause dissatisfaction among the public, considering that it will face more intense pressure from public opinion when its own epidemic prevention is unfavorable, the latter will definitely become the bottom line that cannot be touched at this time. Therefore, adding code layer by layer becomes the product of compromise of public opinion consequences.

2.2.2 The internal influencing factors

(1) The level of government officials

The fundamental starting point of China's emergency management is to reduce emergencies and the casualties and losses caused by them and to ensure the safety of people's lives and property and social stability[7]. However, with the development of practice, a new problem arises, that is, in order to meet the most basic and important requirement of protecting people's lives and property, local government officials often take unreasonable measures that restrict or inconvenience the public. As the main body of local emergency management, the local government is responsible for dealing with sudden public events, but some officials often have the behaviors of lazy administration and evading responsibility. Government officials only consider meeting the fundamental requirement of "fewer emergencies and casualties and losses caused by them, ensuring the safety of people's lives and property and social stability", instead of paying attention to resource depletion and loss of benefits.

In addition, the emergency management ability is an important part of the national governance system and governance ability. To build an emergency management system with Chinese characteristics, there is an urgent need for sufficient high-quality professionals in the field of emergency management that match the "emergency measures of great countries". However, at present, most local government officials in our country generally have not received good systematic theoretical education in emergency management, and leaders and decision-makers lack the decision-making ideas of scientific emergency management. There is also a shortage of emergency management talents in relevant departments. On the one hand, there is a shortage of professional talents, especially comprehensive talents. On the other hand, the current staff's practical ability is weak, and many emergency managers of grass-roots governments are without relevant simulation and practical experience. Under the premise of lack of corresponding thinking and ability, it is not surprising that there is a behavior of adding code layer by layer.

(2) Technological level

Faced with all kinds of severe and complicated public emergencies, the local government's emergency management system and ability are still relatively backward, and the overall level of emergency management informatization is not high. In the construction of an emergency management system, there are still problems that the early warning and monitoring system for major public emergencies are not perfect, and there are still defects in many aspects. For example, during the outbreak of Xi'an epidemic in early January 2022, Xi'an health code, which collapsed twice, not only had a very bad impact on pandemic prevention work but also on people's normal life. Afterward, emotional netizens turned out a news report on June 16th, 2021, which roughly stated: "The members of the health code team carried forward the hard-working spirit, solved many technical problems, and helped health code play its role in epidemic prevention and control." However, in fact, it is the difficulty that the team compressed the 1 MB images to 100 KB. This example can clearly reflect the backwardness of the relevant local government departments or their project outsourcing teams in emergency management technology.

Today, the development of emergency management urgently needs to use new technologies such as cloud computing, big data, the Internet of Things, artificial intelligence, etc. Some local governments lack effective technical means to assist them, and they also lack personnel who are

familiar with related technologies, so they cannot use scientific and reasonable methods to prevent and control the epidemic situation, and the problem of adding code layer by layer is constantly produced.

Through the above analysis, we can basically sort out the logic generated by adding code layer by layer, as shown in Figure 1.

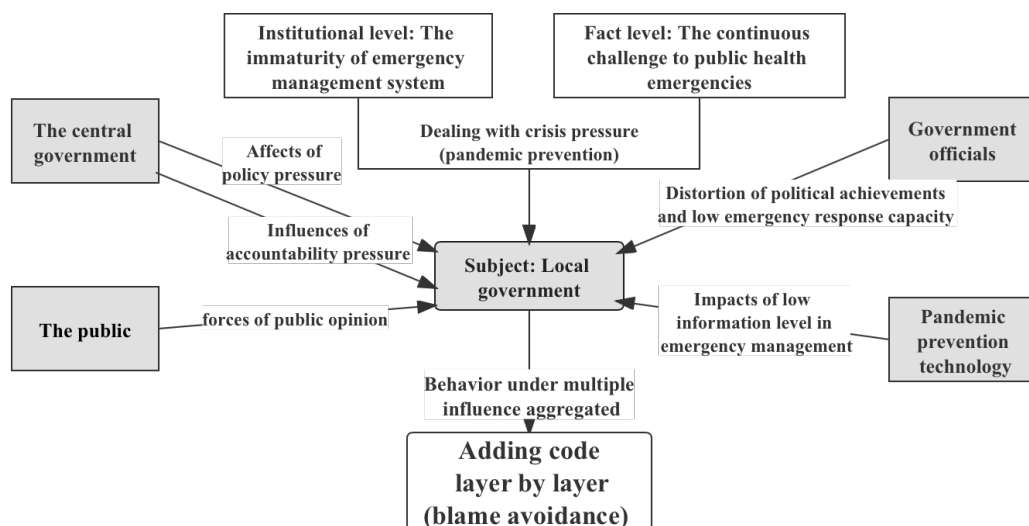


Figure 1 The Logic of the Phenomenon of Adding Code Layer by Layer

3. Summary and reflection

Although the policy of adding code layer by layer has been criticized for its disadvantages of increasing financial burden, avoiding responsibility, and formalism, at present, some scholars have pointed out from the perspective of bureaucratic organization system that moderate adding code layer by layer is also a strategy of countering the decline of super-scale bureaucratic organization execution[8]. However, it should be noted that it is not a problem that can be solved overnight to control the adding code layer by layer in a reasonable and moderate range, and it is really difficult to draw a clear boundary between excessive and scarce emergency response, all of which pose a severe challenge to the government’s emergency management capability. What we can do now is to continue to encourage accurate, scientific, and humanized pandemic prevention measures and incorporate the behavior of evading responsibility and lazy administration into the punishment mechanism, further open up the feedback channels of the public and improve inclusiveness and responsiveness, and continue to exert the fourth right effect of public opinion supervision to correct policies in time and realize the value of policies.

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