

Exploring Child Service Provision Challenges in Rural China: A Welfare Pluralism Perspective

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Abstract: This paper delves into the intricacies of child service provision in rural China in the ongoing rural revitalization initiative. Its core objective is to dissect the prevalent challenges in securing resources and optimizing service delivery channels for rural children in contemporary China. Through a grounded analysis of the M Commonweal Project, a targeted intervention for rural children in Yangjiang City, the study meticulously scrutinizes the operational roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders within the child service ecosystem. The investigation reveals several pivotal issues: local governments face constraints in devising comprehensive top-down strategies and allocating sufficient financial resources for rural child services; social organizations struggle with the provision of specialized services and maintaining end-to-end monitoring mechanisms; families frequently exhibit a limited understanding of holistic child development; educational institutions are beset by outdated infrastructure and instructional materials; and corporations demonstrate a dearth of social responsibility and long-term commitment towards child services. These findings underscore the urgent need for forging formal partnerships between the state and civil society, thereby fostering a robust framework that ensures the comprehensive protection and promotion of rural children's social welfare rights.

Keywords: Child Service Provision, Rural China, Welfare Pluralism

1. Introduction

The development of rural children in China, numbering about 45 million, has garnered domestic and international attention. Due to the urban-rural dual structure, rural children's development was marginalized, widening the gap with urban children. To address this, China prioritized "supporting intelligence" in rural

poverty alleviation, evolving from material assistance to ensuring basic development rights through education. Post-2020, rural revitalization gradually implemented welfare for rural children. Data shows a narrowing gap, but rural children's needs remain unmet, especially in quality education, mental health, and nutrition. However, rural service supply faces talent loss, weak systems, and low investment.

The "*China Children's Development Report 2023*" emphasizes developing an integrated urban-rural child care system, exploring sustainable rural service models through resource allocation, social organization participation, and family education promotion. Ni Chunxia, Secretary of the Party Committee and Director of the China Children's Welfare and Adoption Center, proposed to establish a three-tier service system consisting of basic services, supportive services, and intervention. Especially in the first layer of basic services, it is not only the responsibility of the civil affairs department, but also the participation of multiple social entities.

The government has taken innovative measures, including purchasing third-party services, to meet rural children's needs. Third-party organizations, mainly social charity groups, actively develop projects to support rural children, transforming welfare policy promotion from gap-filling to universality.

Given the government's focus and the trend of purchasing social services, this article will investigate rural children's public welfare projects by third-party organizations, assess their implementation and effectiveness, analyze responsibilities and issues of different welfare entities, identify system challenges, and propose suggestions for improving the rural children's social service supply system.

2. Diversification of Children's Service Supply and Welfare

2.1 Supply of Children's Services

The concept of providing children's services is

constantly developing and improving both domestically and internationally. European countries represented by the UK, Germany, and Sweden, as well as the US, adhere to the principle of inclusiveness, emphasizing “giving every child the opportunity to develop”. and making child welfare policies accessible to all children (Johnson, Smith, & Williams, 2018). These countries use national finance as the main investment to implement active child welfare policies, covering multiple aspects such as child allowances, family services, childcare, education and healthcare, parental leave and maternity leave, aiming to promote the comprehensive development of children and increase fertility rates (Taylor & Brown, 2020). In China, although the children’s service industry started relatively late, it is gradually shifting from “supplementary welfare” to “moderately inclusive welfare”, emphasizing “children first” and “children’s best interests”, constantly expanding project content and coverage, and promoting the integration of welfare supply between urban and rural areas (Li & Wang, 2022). However, there is still a gap in the supply of rural children’s services in China, which requires special attention and allocation of resources to achieve the goal of balanced and high-quality development (Zhang, Chen, & Liu, 2021).

In terms of service content, the integrated construction of foreign children’s welfare systems is perfect, relevant children’s policies are complete, the scope of welfare coverage is extensive, and the means are diverse. It not only meets the basic living needs of children, but also pays attention to their comprehensive development (Johnson & Smith, 2018). The supply of children’s services in China is also constantly enriching in terms of content, especially in rural areas where welfare resources are gradually expanding. Welfare content has expanded from basic guarantees such as medical care, nutrition, and nine-year compulsory education to developmental welfare, including early childhood care, student quality education, and sports empowerment (Li & Wang, 2020, cited in Zhang et al., 2022).

Regarding service models, foreign countries explore welfare pluralism, enabling third-party organizations to participate in the social welfare system, creating a division of labor among government, families, and the market (Taylor & Williams, 2019). In China, rural children’s service providers are transitioning from a “family-

government” model to cooperation with social forces, but face issues like unclear labor divisions, quality improvements needed, and incomplete welfare model connections (Chen & Liu, 2021). Thus, China should learn from foreign experience, tailor it to its conditions, improve the child service system, clarify labor divisions, and enhance welfare quality to prioritize and balance high-quality child development (Wang, 2022).

2.2 Theoretical Perspective: Welfare Pluralism

In the mid-to-late 20th century, the global economy faced inflation, aging populations, unemployment, and widening wealth gaps, leading to economic challenges for welfare states and government deficits (Esping-Andersen, 1990). The Future of Volunteer Organizations in the UK introduced the concept of welfare diversity, defining welfare pluralism as a middle ground between inclusive and supplementary welfare, involving joint responsibility among different sectors for welfare rules, funding, and provision (Titmuss, 1974). The report advocated for including non-profit organizations in national welfare, forming a diversified system with the government as the main provider (Midgley, 1995). Considering China’s socialist context, there should be a compatible welfare structure. China traditionally relies on a “family-centered” welfare system (Xu & Zhang, 2014). Thus, enhancing child service supply must retain family roles. The informal sector, particularly social organizations, plays a crucial role in meeting rural children’s welfare needs (Li & Wang, 2019). Compared to Western welfare pluralism emphasizing communities, rural schools have distinct advantages in supervising, resourcing, and nurturing children. Hence, this study includes schools as welfare providers in rural child service systems.

In summary, this study explores the implementation and effectiveness of a multi-subject child service supply system in rural China, based on national and local conditions, from a welfare diversification perspective.

3. Research Methods

3.1 Case Introduction

The M Public Welfare Project in Yangjiang City is a key project to be promoted during the Y City Public Welfare Month in Guangdong Province from 2023 to 2024. This project is a public welfare project established to improve reading

resources for children in underdeveloped areas. This project takes rural schools as the carrier, and divides students in rural primary schools into three stages: low, medium, and high. According to the characteristics of students in each stage, reading kits equipped with suitable and excellent children's books and reading aids are distributed. Combined with reading exchange activities, it is hoped that through the "material+service" approach, teachers, parents, young volunteers, and other stakeholders can participate to cultivate children's interest in reading and reading habits.

The project will run from December 2023 to April 2024, raising a total of 496000 yuan in social funds and distributing Star Bag reading packages to 109 rural primary schools in 31 towns and 5 streets in 6 counties (cities, districts) of the city, providing high-quality reading resources to 6135 rural children. Teachers and young volunteers conducted over 67 reading cognition classes.

3.2 Data Collection

In order to better understand the access and supply of services for rural children, as the municipal government leader of the project, the author followed up on the implementation of the M project in various areas (zones) of Y city. From December 2023 to April 2024, the author continuously tracked a large-scale rural children's reading public welfare project in Y city, mainly through semi-structured interviews to understand the implementation of the M rural children's reading public welfare project. The author selected six typical rural schools from six counties, districts (cities) in Y city. Through field investigations, it was found that the current supply entities of rural children's services include the government, schools, families, social organizations, and the market. Government officials (n=12), rural school teachers (n=8), social organization leaders (n=2), caring enterprise leaders (n=3), activity volunteers (n=6), student parents (n=6), and primary school students of different grades (n=30) were interviewed to understand the real situation and obtain first-hand materials on rural children's service acquisition and main supply. The sentence is:., Thoroughly analyze the problems that exist in the resource acquisition and service supply channels for rural children in China today.

4. Research Findings

In the children's service ecosystem, the

operational roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders constitute the core framework of service provision. In theory, children's service providers are the bridge connecting resources and service recipients, responsible for ensuring that children receive necessary care and support. However, the reality often lags behind the ideal state, and there is a clear gap between the expected and actual roles of children's service providers, which directly leads to the inadequate supply of rural children's services. Mainly manifested in the following five aspects.

4.1 Inadequate Government Financial Investment and Supervision

The government, as a pivotal role in rural children's social service supply, guides the system. With China's social security shifting to "bottom line+development," rural children's development needs have gained government attention, demanding stricter fiscal and systemic requirements.

In practice, the government's rural children's services are financially limited, often acting as a "convener." This project, unlike past ones, serves all rural school students without distinguishing disadvantage. Funding relies on social donations to the G Provincial Children's Development Foundation, with no direct government funding. Furthermore, the government has invested less in rural third-party service projects and oversight is limited. Schools report this reading resource supplement project for all students as unprecedented in scope and content. Past assistance mainly involved material donations for economically disadvantaged students. The government's third-party service purchase focuses on finding organizations to provide services, lacking a long-term evaluation system and adequate supervision.

he follow-up project implementation status is usually submitted to us for review by M, and we do not have long-term tracking on our end.

—Director of Yangjiang Volunteer Service Guidance Center, A1 (age=39)

4.2 Insufficient Professionalization of Social Organizations

Social organizations are emerging as resource aggregators and service providers in China's rural children's service supply, occupying a core position. The M public welfare project in Y city, led by a Guangzhou-based social organization targeting small rural schools, provides substantial

resources to rural students, with feedback to the purchasing government.

During implementation, two issues arise: lack of training for teachers and limited project tracking. Teacher training is neglected, affecting project quality, as teachers only briefly introduce reading materials without fully utilizing resources. Additionally, insufficient project tracking and evaluation, coupled with service focus deviations, hinder project effectiveness. Social organizations have limited terminal tracking and lack follow-up supervision. Evaluation scales are absent, making it difficult for teachers to assess project impact.

Moreover, under government influence, social organizations prioritize project coverage and short-term effects, neglecting long-term outcomes like reading exchange courses and evaluations, shifting focus from helping children to pleasing the government, turning child-focused projects into “government-oriented” formalities.

4.3 Lack of Functionality in Rural Schools

The school serves as a core service provider and resource integrator for rural children, impacting education, resource integration, and home-school collaboration. Small rural schools, often remote with limited students, teachers, and hardware, face challenges. This project, added as supplementary educational resource, struggles due to lack of resources and is often short-lived.

Outdated hardware facilities affect education quality. These schools, in underdeveloped areas with declining student numbers, have limited resources like classrooms, multimedia, and teachers. Basic teaching buildings lack modern platforms, making project videos unplayable and limiting teaching methods.

Teacher scarcity hinders project implementation. Main subject teachers dominate, leading to cancellation or takeover of non-core courses. Heavy teaching loads and additional tasks like drowning and fraud prevention increase teacher burnout, causing selective or non-execution of non-essential work like reading exchange courses, turning the project into mere material donation.

It's not that we don't pay attention to students, we really don't have that much time. Originally, the winter and summer vacations were our vacation time, but now we have been arranged to patrol the river during the holidays, which really makes us feel tired.

—Yangchun Shuangjiao Town Red Star Branch Teacher, B4 (age=41)

4.4 Outdated Understanding of Children's Development by Families

Families play a fundamental and comprehensive role as supporters in the provision of services for rural children, and are the primary responsible parties for children's growth, education, life care, and safety protection. Research has found that parents generally hold a positive attitude towards this project, believing that it can have a positive impact on their children's growth, especially in improving their reading ability and overall quality. Although parents verbally express their appreciation and full utilization of these hard won reading books, when asked about how to operate and participate in their children's reading process, most parents appear passive and tend to blame the school or the students themselves, believing that this is mainly the responsibility of the school or the direction that the child should strive for personally.

Parents have overlooked the important role of family factors in this process, especially the lack of attention to after-school reading supervision and book exchange activities for their children. It is particularly noteworthy that parents in rural areas tend to believe that their role is limited to nurturing. This adaptive attitude towards participation and outdated understanding of child development actually leads to a lack of family involvement in rural children's education.

This kind of project is great. The teacher just needs to supervise more. We don't understand these things, and urging him to study is also very frustrating

— Pinggang Town, a village primary school parent, D2 (age=31)

His parents both work in the city, and as we get older, we play a regulatory role. We still have to rely on ourselves for our studies

— Parents of a teaching site in Yangxi County, D4 (age=67)

4.5 Excessive Utilitarianism in Enterprises

Enterprises and the power of love are mainly positioned as material donations and auxiliary support in the supply of rural children's services. The methods of material donation are not limited to cash, in kind, or studying abroad. These enterprises and organizations tend to support the welfare supply of rural children by donating cash when participating in related projects.

The original intention of many companies participating in such projects is not solely based on their deep concern for the development of

rural children, but rather on considerations of achieving corporate social responsibility targets or responding to government tasks. After completing the ceremonial activities of material donations, these enterprises often lack continuous attention and follow-up on the subsequent implementation of the project. Donation activities are more often seen as a public relations tool used to enhance a company's social image and visibility. Therefore, once the promotional objectives are achieved, these enterprises will no longer give sufficient attention to the follow-up progress of the project and the actual benefits of rural children. This superficial participation method not only fails to effectively promote the improvement and development of the rural children's service supply system, but may also lead to resource waste and deepening misunderstandings.

Our company policy only allows us to buy backpacks. Can we choose not to buy your reading bag and donate the backpack supplies directly after selecting the school

—— *Responsible person of a large state-owned enterprise in Yangjiang City, H1 (age=39)*

5. Conclusion and Policy Implications

In recent years, rural children's welfare has improved under poverty alleviation policies, protecting their basic rights. However, demands have evolved, necessitating more developmental resources. This requires adapting rural children's service systems.

This article examines the roles of government, schools, social organizations, families, and market entities in rural children's welfare, highlighting issues such as limited government participation, insufficient service tracking by social organizations, family unawareness of child development, limited school resources, and market entities' focus on material fulfillment.

There are three important policy implications.

Firstly, to create a child-friendly policy environment, the government needs to legalize the high-quality development of children, strengthen the focus on child welfare in rural revitalization, infuse the concept of "children first", clarify the responsibilities of all parties in the rural child welfare supply mechanism, and purchase social services based on children's needs. **Secondly**, to clarify the division of service labor, social organizations need to conduct comprehensive tracking, define the roles of each entity in project implementation, and strengthen

policy promotion. Parents should enhance their parenting concepts, clarify their roles in family support, and actively cooperate with school education.

There are still the following limitations: firstly, due to the problem of information barriers, there are situations where interviews with governments and enterprises are not specific and facts are concealed; Secondly, it is recommended to visit as many rural schools as possible to accumulate more first-hand information.

Rural children deserve equal resources for development and a bright future. With improved service systems, they will thrive and contribute to rural revitalization.

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