

Social Work Involved in Targeted Poverty Alleviation: From Individual Aid to System Change

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Abstract: The development of social work is to some extent a history of the struggle against poverty. Social work enabled targeted poverty alleviation aims to form a two-way force to implement targeted poverty alleviation policies in a bid to create a new situation featuring top-down policy guidance and bottom-up social engagement. Social work enabled targeted poverty alleviation addresses the bureaucratic defects of government dominance, upgrades the narrow conception of targeted poverty alleviation as individual aid, and pays more attention to the interactions between the poor and environmental elements and the interactions within and between systems from the perspective of eco-system. In practice, this type of poverty alleviation is manifested as social work driven integral specialized poverty alleviation. By organically combining the four systems of subjects, service objects, work processes and implementation results, it advances current targeted poverty alleviation from the mid-shallow level to the deep level. It is expected to fulfill the intrinsic policy objectives of targeted poverty alleviation and explore a supporting system for realizing the modernization of national governance system and capacity in rural areas.

Keywords: targeted poverty alleviation; social work; eco-system; aid; social participation

China halved its impoverished population ten years ahead of schedule of the target 1A (halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people living on less than \$1.25 a day) of the UN's Millennium Development Goal 1 (MDG 1). Especially a range of innovative approaches to poverty governance of the poverty-stricken "three xi regions" of northwest China (eco-migration-triggered poverty

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alleviation in Hexi, Dingxi & Xihaigu, immigrant village-based poverty alleviation, etc.) contributed valuable experience to poverty alleviation in the Third World countries. On the other hand, the Chinese government's investment in poverty alleviation now harvests diminishing returns and the government-backed poverty alleviation in rural areas is experiencing limited results. Current practices of targeted poverty alleviation lack sufficient participation of impoverished households and relevant aid policies are not distinctive and flexible enough. Poverty alleviation practices are troubled by complaints and fund shortages. In-village poverty alleviation teams fail to deliver satisfactory performance (Ge & Xing, 2015). Government-led "blood transfusion" style poverty alleviation is faced with huge challenges in the new stage of China's poverty alleviation.

China's targeted poverty alleviation policies in the new era focus on three key issues; "who must receive poverty relief," "who is to implement poverty relief" and "how to implement poverty relief." to tackle the real challenges in rural poverty alleviation. Targeted poverty alleviation, to a large extent, means precise adoption of poverty alleviation measures according to specific conditions in systematic practice. According to relevant investigations, however, during the advancement of the existing bureaucratic targeted poverty alleviation in many regions, the programs have evolved into individual-oriented anti-poverty interventions and policies, which overlook traditional collective resources and cultures in rural China. Collectivism-based mutual aid & cooperation and development-style anti-poverty are scarcely practiced. Not much importance is attached to community development and supportive eco-systems. Under such circumstances, the government-led poverty alleviation has become isolated. Low efficiency is becoming the biggest challenge facing

current targeted poverty alleviation.

1. Identifying the problem: targeted poverty alleviation's dilemma in individual aid

The existing targeted poverty alleviation policies attach importance to targeted practice but fail to foster any feasible approach to the collaboration of individuals, teams, families and communities of a subject system. Such a reality leads to a significant underestimation of the complexity of rural communities and decreases the diversity of government's responsibility in targeted poverty alleviation.

In studies of international social work, welfare and policies, giving full play of the multiple subjects of family (kinship), community, market and state, and exhibits characteristics of "East Asian welfare model", "familism paradigm" and "care diamond theory" which exerting an increasingly strong impact on global reform in social welfare (Zhou). Perhaps it would be better to take the professional advantage of social work and gather strengths from the anti-poverty eco-system for targeted poverty alleviation in the future.

A social work based evaluation indicates that production caused poverty, consumption caused poverty and ecological deterioration caused poverty are three structural factors of rural poverty. These three factors bring severe damage to rural societies, cultures and environments and trap rural China in an unsustainable production model (Yang & Min). For anti-poverty interventions, the switch of perspective from "problem orientation" to "development orientation" is of crucial importance. According to relevant studies, the application of a diversity of development oriented social work strategies can help avoid the over generalness of common development theories and methods, rectify

the existing practice of “excessive emphasis on technical and economic interventions and scant attention on individuals and communities”, and make anti-poverty actions more flexible, targeted and capable of inspiring the initiative of the impoverished populations. More progress has been made in targeted poverty alleviation, precise identification of impoverished individuals in need of aid, cost control of micro-poverty alleviations, as well as work performance improvements. The subsequent significant improvement of anti-poverty policies is key to the rectification of unsatisfactory poverty-alleviation policies and the empowerment of targeted impoverished individuals (Ma, 2014). These studies uncovered a pressing need to include social work into targeted poverty alleviation.

However, Chinese social work's feature of “weak integration” results in its lack of deep engagement in the practice of targeted poverty alleviation. Most of the abovementioned research findings remain at the level of macro institutional argumentation and focus on the theoretic exploration of “ought to be”. There is a lack of “actuality”-based results of research on the practical operation of targeted poverty alleviation at the level of micro-argumentation. Few discussions are made of individual cases in social work enabled targeted poverty alleviation, which consequently impairs the “precision” studies on of China.

In general, current mechanisms of poverty alleviation and development still follow a government-led approach, with insufficient social engagement and endogenous power of poverty alleviation (Zhao, 2016). Targeted poverty alleviation policies in China are mainly designed to echo the governments will and fail to attract enough participation of social work professionals (Gu, 2016). China's practice and studies of social work enabled targeted poverty alleviation are far from satisfactory, which is mainly reflected in the following three aspects. First, studies on targeted poverty alleviation are at the early stage and remain

at the conceptual and strategic level, for which they can hardly facilitate the effective implementation of targeted poverty alleviation policies. Second, there is a severe lack of studies on the endogenous power and the masses. Third, studies on social work enabled anti-poverty practices remain at the explanatory and descriptive levels, for which areas concerning operable policies, practical strategies and service systems are rarely touched upon, making it difficult to summarize a sea of first-hand practical experiences. Therefore, the effective implementation of social work enabled targeted poverty alleviation is of great significance for China to promote the coordinated development of individuals and communities as a whole, review previous experiences and lessons in social work supported anti-poverty campaigns, and explore a systematic scheme for improving the overall efficiency of targeted poverty alleviation (Li & Xu, 2016).

Below is a case study based on the field research of eight representative villages in poverty alleviation targeted relocation areas in south Shaanxi, the poverty alleviation targeted eco-compensation areas of Dingxi (Gansu) and Guyuan (Ningxia). This field research was conducted from October to December in 2016. During this field research, I interviewed 21 officials at the town and township level and 40 village officials/villagers' group leaders and conducted participatory research in 10 social services agencies which participated in the programs of rural community development and targeted poverty alleviation in Shaanxi, Gansu, Ningxia and Qinghai. By consulting relevant files and service records of the above local authorities and social services agencies, I made a comprehensive and systematic analysis of the problems exposed during the implementation process of targeted poverty alleviation. These three provinces and one autonomous region (Shaanxi, Gansu, Ningxia and Qinghai) are still faced with four severe development challenges: (1) a large number of impoverished population and a high



Dingxi

level of poverty, (2) multiple linked destitute areas and a serious degree of development difficulty, (3) a variety of poverty causes with huge re-poverty pressures, (4) a substantial income gap and prominent relative poverty. The linked impoverished areas in the northwest represent China's national poverty alleviation landscape in miniature. For some provinces, impoverished areas account for over 65% of their whole land. Thus, these areas were the right choice for this investigation and research in social work enabled targeted poverty alleviation.

2. From targeted individual aid to ecological professional poverty alleviation

Challenges faced by impoverished rural populations on their path to poverty alleviation include a multitude of external environmental factors, such as natural conditions, poverty alleviation and development policies, and economic conditions (Wang, 2016). The Decision jointly issued by the

CPC Central Committee and the State Council on Winning the Fight Against Poverty has clearly pointed out that the poverty alleviation schemes must be carried out precisely regarding the identity of the target group, the arrangement of programs and the allocation of fund, while ensuring effective measures for each household, special delegates to each village for help and clearly predictable targets to be achieved. Every step in this process, from identifying the beneficiary to determining the target of the work, must be well managed. It can thus be understood that anti-poverty is a concerted collective task, which contains group activities undertaken by different levels of government in collaboration, or local governments combined with external supporters, or the governments combined with non-governmental forces, the poverty-stricken population and all stakeholders during the work of poverty alleviation. The success of anti-poverty measures relies on the integration of the entire anti-poverty system and the capabilities of the anti-poverty actors (Tan, 2016). Seen from the system theory for social work, targeted

poverty alleviation should involve changes in four basic systems: the driving subject system, namely the social workers and the organizations behind them; the service object system, namely seeking help and collaborating with individuals, groups, families and collectives of the driving subject system; the service goal system, namely the target group that the driving subject system tries to change and lift out of poverty; and the action system, namely how the driving subject system works to achieve its goals (Pincus & Minahan, 1973). Only when the four systems work in collaboration can real aid be delivered.

2.1 Network interaction to reduce the bureaucratic trap for the subject system of targeted poverty alleviation

Targeted poverty alleviation is a top-down interacting system. Stressing “concerted efforts” and integration of resources, it is a systematic, dynamic and multidimensional process, “the six varieties of targeted measures, four principles for policy implementation, five channels for poverty alleviation and ten projects”. The “three-in-one” anti-poverty panorama (consisting of special anti-poverty measures, industry-based measures & social support, as well as the vision of “lifting people out of poverty in five batches”) covers poverty alleviation approaches such as improving productivity, relocating people, introducing ecological compensation mechanisms, developing education and using social security as the base. The implementation of this whole set of policies concerns a long and complicated process of needs evaluation, service delivery, re-poverty prevention and social aid provision.

First, the multi-level transmission mechanism of targeted poverty alleviation is subject to systematic deviation. Targeted poverty alleviation, in a broad sense, is a delivery system of public goods. The provider and the object are placed inside a poverty alleviation ecology. Investigation has revealed that the policy transmission system has malfunctioned

in many areas, and policies are working worse than expected. The diversification of subjects generated by poverty alleviation programs, the decentralization of interests, the multi-level management of the programs, the specialization of work, and the fragmented and backward appraisal of programs are all universal challenges. In some areas, anti-poverty is taken as a battle of annihilation, where all resources are poured into impoverished regions and households. Poverty figures are largely reduced on paper. The moment a poverty alleviation program ceases working, corresponding favorable policies are impossible to continue, and relevant staff are pulled out, the fragility of impoverished households instantly prevails and brings them back to poverty (Zheng, 2016). This type of anti-poverty scheme producing instant, short-term effects suits the bureaucratic evaluation well; yet since its feasibility is difficult to monitor and track, it ends up as tokenism, which poses numerous, insidious threats to poverty alleviation in the long run.

Second, the multi-centered linkage effect of targeted poverty alleviation has not been truly realized. To clearly specify responsibilities, many regions establish a poverty alleviation system that unites diverse departments with different functions. However, as they are independent from each other, there arises inconsistency in the process and effect, thus weakening the entire impact of the poverty alleviation work. Though targeted poverty alleviation takes targeted measures in assessing the organizations and people responsible, and the trans-regional or trans-departmental coordination sounds both logically and theoretically feasible, the entire system suffers from inconsistency. The reason is that clear responsibility is based on a clear division of work. Those bodies responsible, due to their difference in advantages and perspectives, end up in partial concern for merely their own tasks and political points, thus causing inconsistency in brewing, implementing and

advancing their policies and measures. The prevalence of administrative division, departmental selfishness, unbalanced structures in rural governance, as well as atomization and class stratification of villagers has removed the holistic mechanism of poverty alleviation work from the resource system, and the fragmentation of targeted poverty alleviation is increasingly highlighted.

Third, the selective implementation of policies deviates from what is first purported. People who work at the frontier of targeted poverty alleviation are mainly township officials, who, inside the entire working system of targeted poverty alleviation, assume the largest responsibilities yet the least power. With evaluation pressure, many of them would select easier targets promising more instant rewards are more favored to recognize. Take loans for example, it is flexible in real practice: “The loans are supposed to be used for wealth-creating purposes. Yet, it turns out that many people in the village do not have the ability to achieve sustainable development, or to withstand market risks. Loans to them are sure to go away like water down the drain. Still, township officials are required to report a specified number of loans and are even assessed by the number. To reduce risks, many officials prefer to lend money to those capable of repaying and resisting market risks” (XF, Director of the Poverty Relief Office, J County). Those selective loans could maintain the normal work of a system, yet it also leads to deviation in results. Internal conflicts and antagonistic emotions might arise among villages, in an objective sense further worsening the social polarization of the villagers. Such implementation of policies deviating from what is first purported is universally seen in the poverty alleviation work. It has wielded a large, negative influence on the entire ecology of targeted poverty alleviation and might even threaten the result of targeted poverty alleviation programs.

Social work enabled poverty alleviation, through

mechanisms like the villagers’ council and the joint conference between the organizations working for poverty alleviation, makes transparent the bottom-top demands and the top-down services, making the poverty alleviation programs more targeted and customized, and truly highlighting the pursuit of precision in the anti-poverty campaigns of this new era.

2.2 Encouraging altruism to activate the service-object eco-system of targeted poverty alleviation

Poverty alleviation as an ecology not only calls for a good environment inside the subject system, but also requires that a benign operating mechanism be formed and maintained. Relevant investigations show that social service agencies have functioned fully as a coordinator and resource linker during the poverty alleviation work. Serving as a middleman to interpret policies, link resources and locate objects these agencies work effectively compensating for the relatively stiff bureaucracy, and preventing different levels or departments of the government from being indifferent to others and merely taking care of their own affairs.

Placing individuals in a holistic environment is what social work enabled poverty alleviation is about. The existing capacities of the impoverished groups, along with the natural, economic and social circumstances they are in, the socio-economic policies for poverty alleviation and development, are key factors for analyzing and identifying the demands of impoverished populations and are integral indicators of actual poverty alleviation. When they are evaluating an individual environment, social workers must place their interferential efforts on the environment, concentrate on analyzing the relationships between different elements of the whole system, and notice how the change of any element might influence the other elements of the system.

Whether in the linked poverty-stricken areas or the distributed poor communities, social polarization is a prevalent headache. Typically, a village consists

of rich households, medium households, below-medium households and absolute poor households. It is clear that the latter two are the object of poverty alleviation, yet considering the different needs of the different levels of the households, only when the whole village is placed inside an ecology can a path be found to vivify the rural communities and advance their development.

“The hollowing-out phenomenon is prominently encroaching upon villages, leaving behind the old, the infirm, the sick and the disabled, and more than ever, reducing villages to a sheet of loose sand. Thus, wherever there is something seemingly worthy, there are sure crowds ready to pounce upon it with greedy eyes. There is no real leadership in the village. People just pounce upon things they want. And a good neighborhood is rarely possible to be found here” (JGY, an official based at the H Village, L County). In such a setting, it becomes especially crucial for targeted poverty alleviation to transform its philosophy of “helping others help themselves” into actions that will enhance communications and social unity within the villages, or else any external aid and support will end up drowning in internal frictions and conflicts. Apart from the social stratification of rural communities, attention must also be paid to investment in social networks and social capital. In this light, in the tragic “Yang Gailan Case”^① a strong sense of alienation and loss may be the straw that breaks the camel’s back.

“It’s kind of difficult to identify the real poor households. Things are highly complicated here. There so many villagers whose livelihoods do not vary much, and that means we can only take to egalitarianism, or else targeted poverty alleviation might solve one problem only to find another cropping up” (DFG, deputy head of M Town). “It’s hard to be

100% sure about things here. Some people might buy an unregistered house, or an unlicensed truck, but there is no way to track them down. If such things are reported, then we will take on responsibility. That thought alarms us every day” (HH, village Party branch secretary of M Village, K County).

Such cases are not rare in targeted poverty alleviation, for example, the L Village of Jiangxi Province, had made every effort to get a road construction project. However, the entire project was stranded only because a family was unwilling to have its abandoned kitchen along the route demolished. And the reason for that— “The road belongs to the village, but the kitchen belongs to my family” (Li, 2016). Though poverty alleviation programs are meant to provide common welfare for the poor group, the relationship between each household or individual and a program is different. So are the sacrifices each household or individual must make if a program is allowed into a village. That might cause villagers to only think about their own interest, block effective cooperation and make poverty alleviation resources inaccessible for poor people. Successful cases in which social work joins in targeted poverty alleviation have shown that any anti-poverty program that has not won the majority of the villagers is hardly likely to succeed. Only when realizing “altruism” by respecting the actual demands of each household and encouraging villagers to “benefit collectivity” by conducting a systematic analysis of the villages can targeted poverty alleviation achieve ends even through ordinary means.

Those successful cases share something in common. First, for richer households, social workers choose to leverage their strengths and encourage them to act as role models. For example, rural cooperatives are established, which integrate the

^① Yang was a 28-year-old mother who killed her four children aged from three to six by poisoning before committing suicide on August 26, 2016. Yang’s husband was found dead a few days later, with his death also said to be the result of poisoning. Some media reports attributed this tragedy to poverty.

fragmented individual businesses, optimize the allocation of resources and enable the rich people to help the poor people, while, through its most direct demonstration and instruction to the poor, with a stronger feeling of “fate change”. Meanwhile, such a model highlights the inner cohesion of the village and helps the entire village to develop. Second, for medium households, who assume a large proportion of the villagers and mainly sink into poverty because of education fees or lack of resources, social workers help them by increasing investments in education, funding their capacity building or granting scholarships. Third, for the below-medium households, who suffer illness or physical handicap and are vulnerable to market risks, social aid is their way out. Last, the absolute poor households are set as the key object of the poverty alleviation assistance. Social workers help them to shake off poverty by linking together resources, introducing governmental aid for their most basic needs and leveraging the force of social charities.

Facts have proved that the poverty alleviation model in which social workers adopt a bottom-up evaluation of the demands of the impoverished population, fully consider the villages’ logic in governance and people-to-people bonds as well as the influence of local cultural values, incorporate the objects of poverty alleviation service into a communal ecology and take an integrated development strategy (Bradshaw, 2007), is far more effective than the traditional poverty alleviation model in its overall performance and inner driving ability.

2.3 Mobilizing both internal and external forces to cultivate an aid system for targeted poverty alleviation

Poverty alleviation and development is a project that requires both government and individual efforts. This top-down scheme, aiming to help mainly through material aid, is best known for its ability to be quantified and be divided into visible

stages, namely that if the per capita income of a household is raised within a certain period above the poverty level, then it can be considered to have been lifted out of poverty. However, in real cases of poverty alleviation, the bureaucratic evaluation might transmit pressure that can alter the original nature of the well-intended poverty alleviation scheme and the actual poverty alleviation deeds of the community-level government authorities and officials may even be limited by poverty alleviation and social morality. “The family attended by the director of the organization department of the county Party committee is such a hopeless example as could never be truly saved. Its access to poverty alleviation support was only vaguely justified. However, our officials were so worn out by its complaining that they had to let it in. However, during several years, even though it was supported by the means provided by the director of the organization department, which were obviously advantageous in quantity, it did not make any progress in its anti-poverty battle. So, the director told the family that they themselves had to work hard or else he would quit. And the family retorted that if he dare quit then he would not be forgiven by the county government” (PKH, director of the Poverty Alleviation Office, L County).

“Township officials are facing overwhelming pressure. Though poverty alleviation is designed as a long-term task it is difficult for township officials to continue efforts to enhance the people’s abilities or improve the poverty alleviation ecology once they have fulfilled their designated task to lift one household out of poverty. The impoverished rural households remain fragile and are prone to returning to poverty” (KGF, director of the Poverty Alleviation Office, K County).

By contrast, the bottom-up style of targeted poverty alleviation is careful to consider the individual characteristics of impoverished households and focuses on a long-term goal, namely thorough

eradication of poverty, which is also a process that could rarely be quantified. Therefore, international anti-poverty research, according to causes of poverty, summarizes anti-poverty theories into five systems; individual deficiencies, cultural belief systems that support subcultures in poverty, political-economic distortions, geographical disparities, and cumulative and circumstantial origins. Social work practice, in particular, is seen as a part of an ecology, while targeted poverty alleviation should be considered an integrated process of providing service (Jiao, 2014). The application of social work to anti-poverty work is distinctive from the traditional “let figures and indicators speak” approach, for it adopts a circular service strategy based on poverty alleviation as an ecology (see Table 1). The core of the circular strategy is to understand the object of the service in its interaction with its surrounding environment, to link the changes of the object with other people around it, to let them influence and motivate each other, and to build a mutually helpful social network.

Table 1 Comparison Between Two Different Service Strategies

Service strategy	The starting point	Target of the service	The course of the change
Linear service strategy	The object of the service	To change the object	Unfolding in a linear manner
Circular service strategy	The object of the service and other people around it	To change the object of the service and other people around it	Unfolding in a circular manner

Due to regional cultural belief systems, socio-economic patterns and geographical characteristics, a poverty alleviation scheme which lacks flexibility and the ability to respond is hardly likely to let its programs and resources precisely benefit the target group, nor to realize targeted poverty alleviation. That is the more professional method of involving

social work in targeted poverty alleviation, for it aims to truly eradicate poverty by basing its design of services upon actual demands. However, the services provided by social work are often purchased by the government, which means that their services have a limited cycle, and thus it becomes most necessary for a poor region to produce a sustainable development ability. Social work enabled poverty alleviation work in impoverished towns and communities will prove helpful for making targeted poverty alleviation work more professional, improving the community-level officials' working ability, securing circular services for the impoverished individuals and rural communities, and gradually evolving poverty alleviation work from “blood transfusion” to “blood making”.

2.4 Empowering the poor is the way to strengthen the capacity of targeted poverty alleviation services

The willpower and ability of the impoverished households themselves is the endogenous power for the advancement of targeted poverty alleviation and enhancement of their self-development. However, the lack of inner drive has become a major challenge faced by rural impoverished households and communities. The government's continuous anti-poverty privileged policies, on the one hand, have brought impoverished households opportunities; yet on the other hand, in some sense, they have made those people more reliant on the government and external supporters and have sunk them into unwillingness to develop by themselves (Tong, 2008, p. 189). To change this unfavorable inclination, the principle of being specific must be upheld when the cases are analyzed. Special attention must be paid to “empowering” those poor people and “enhancing their capabilities”. Different plans must be made to suit the different conditions of the families while self-reliance must be fully encouraged. Therefore, in the long run, targeted poverty alleviation is a scheme to increase the impoverished households' income,

and more importantly, to enhance their ability for self-development to make them readier for risks.

The existing poverty alleviation policies have already abandoned the simple distribution of funds and material supplies as a solution and are indeed advocating battling poverty by developing industries and increasing employment. The common practice is to allocate livestock to poor people. However, the livestock sent out as subsidies often end up in markets in exchange for cash, which seems more visually pleasant. Thus, It is a vicious circle. Outsiders attribute this to the restrictive power of the peasant mentality, or the local culture, yet according to local farmers and rural communities, that is because the poverty alleviation policies do not adequately understand the rural ecology. The government must consider the local natural conditions and whether there is enough forage for the livestock. If the answer is no, farmers' sales of livestock in some regions is inevitable. Social workers' interviews with some villagers reveal the answers to the problem above. "It is too dry here. Forage is not enough for pasturage. We discussed the problem with the villagers and found rabbits and pheasants to be better choices, for they both have very low fatality rates. So, when all the other villages are raising cattle and sheep, we raise something different. That largely increases the villagers' ability to resist the market risks. And once a benign circle develops, villagers begin to rely on themselves, leaving us no more work than 'back-end support'" (official of a project funded by G Poverty Alleviation Foundation).

Villagers know more about local crop farming and livestock breeding than experts and the government. Their overlapping industries can largely reduce profits gained from livestock breeding. The discussion between social workers and villagers about establishing a farmers' community also solved the "free-rider problem" that external restraints have failed to tackle. "We involve all the farmers, and

we will choose a specific period, during which no one is allowed to sell his cattle or sheep. Whoever breaks his promise will lose his money (for the next phase)!" Apart from economic restraints, the sense of pride is also used as an effective tool to regulate. "If anyone is caught selling the cattle or sheep from the government in private, then nobody in the village will ever attend the wedding or funeral of his family" (LLF, director of HZ Social work Service Centre).

The solutions proposed by villagers under the guidance of social workers are not only feasible, but also will be better supervised and carried out as a consensus after joint discussion, and the villagers will perform better in self-reliance and mutual help. This is a process of empowering villagers and rural communities, respecting their independent willpower to change, and enhancing their ability to gain resources and change their fate. Meanwhile, by breaking through the limitations of the former government-led poverty alleviation policies focusing on "visible figures and indicators", the new method of involving social work in targeted poverty alleviation is able to truly "teach the poor people to fish rather than giving them fish" by making them more capable. First, attention has been paid to their capacity building. In addition to service objects, the new method also focuses on their entire living, especially the development and mobilization of their capacity. Second, on the psychological level, the new method focuses on the overall psychological state of the people, rather than a dimension of their psychology, and views the psychology of the impoverished population as a changing whole. Third, regarding social aid, the new method shifts its focus from individual development to the establishment and expansion of the social aid network which links the service objects. Special attention, in particular, has gone to the social environment and social network the service objects live in, so that the mechanism of

identifying the precisely legitimate target group can be improved on when the social forces participate in targeted poverty alleviation (Zhang & Chen, 2017).

From the perspective of social work ecology, targeted poverty alleviation cannot be advanced without a scientific analysis of the causes of poverty and a rational evaluation of controllable resources. In terms of causes of poverty, if the poverty is prevalent to a region, then individuals might have little to do with the poverty, and quite the contrary, external factors such as the environment and culture might be the primary culprits. The external factors can be further divided into natural environments, public administration, and public services. If there is a hard-to-change poor family, the reason for their poverty might be tied with their encounters as individuals or as a family. Whether their poverty is due to objective factors like illness and disaster, or deficient subjective initiative and capability, or both, each case of poverty must be treated as something that has a distinctive worth. Only when the responsibilities are clarified and variable factors are identified can the social workers begin to link together, coordinate and mobilize all kinds of feasible resources in a scientific manner, then based on the controllable factors men face when “present on scene”, decide on appropriate target groups and topics and propose suitable countermeasures (Tan, 2016). It is necessary to conduct effective research on a case-by-case basis, to expand the research and carry out physical practices, to gain a sensible insight into the causes of both individual and collective poverty, to fully exploit all resources available, and to solve all kinds of problems during the implementation of the targeted measures for poverty alleviation, so as to shift the focus from individual aid to the entire ecology of poverty alleviation.

3. Conclusion and suggestions on policy

Poverty alleviation as scheduled is an important

goal of finishing building a moderately prosperous society in all respects. In 2016, China saw a reduction of 12.4 million in the impoverished rural population, with a remaining impoverished rural population of 43.35 million registered. This indicates that there is still a long way to go before China truly eradicates poverty. Any public policy has its lifecycle. As a brand new public policy, targeted poverty alleviation remains at the early stage of policy development. This reality, along with its tough “last-mile” objects of poverty alleviation, highlights a pressing need of support from social work and procedural innovations.

3.1 Social work as a catalyst for the establishment of a social participation mechanism for targeted poverty alleviation

The 2017 Document No. 1 of the Central Government proposed to “further promote the implementation of all policies concerning targeted poverty alleviation”; “inspire the impoverished population to actively create wealth, establish a long-term mechanism for sustainable poverty alleviation, and keep improving such a mechanism”. Social work enabled targeted poverty alleviation complements the government-led top-down poverty alleviation mechanism. Social work helps to formulate anti-poverty system policies and align relevant policies with real actions; facilitates the integration of poverty-alleviation system policies with the capacity building of impoverished populations (Zheng, 2016). From a long-term perspective, social work enabled targeted poverty alleviation is an inevitable approach to the building of an “upper-lower interacted” anti-poverty policy system, and is also an important means of tackling current challenges facing targeted poverty alleviation (decentralized distribution of programs and weak networks of social support). Social work enabled targeted poverty alleviation requires a clear recognition of the eco-system that relevant social services are in. In general, social work services should focus on reforming four systems concerning media, service

objects, service goals and actions. At the village-level, however, social work services target much smaller systems with specific affairs. The joint goal of such macro and micro-level social work is to mobilize, organize and cultivate villagers through professional services to develop a self-sustaining system.

3.2 Social work drives transformation of targeted poverty alleviation from problem-oriented to development-oriented

To understand targeted poverty alleviation from the perspective of social work eco-system, relevant authorities should replace the existing problem-oriented perspective with an empowerment and strength perspective and stop attributing rural poverty to “lack of capacity and resources”. The short-term strategic goal is to alleviate individual or household poverty; the mid-term goal is to boost rural community development; the long-term goal is to enhance the development capacities of both impoverished rural households and communities. Social work enabled targeted poverty alleviation attaches more importance to the “whole system” of anti-poverty campaigns, elements of local culture, existing systems and life cultural strategies. Meanwhile, it also pays close attention to the ecology of rural community development beyond the scope of targeted poverty alleviation and impoverished rural populations and integrates social work into local cultural and economic systems.

When it comes to policy innovation, during the process of targeted poverty alleviation, local responsible authorities may only focus on objects and objectives and overlook the overall ecology when planning for their tenure or evaluating their performance. To address this issue, relevant government authority should include social work into their overall planning of targeted poverty alleviation by such means as the purchase of public services, provide social services for impoverished rural households as indirect services, and give full play to

social work's unique role in cultivating the capacity of rural households and creating social capital for rural communities. Social work enabled targeted poverty alleviation diversifies the existing single direct/indirect service model with more flexible services and thereby achieves the required precision for poverty alleviation. At present, local governments at the village and township levels remain the primary practitioners of social work, while impoverished farmers are the objects. Based on the actual conditions, China should offer indirect services (consultation, research and policy guidance) to such local governments and provide direct services for the farmers through individual, group or community channels.

3.3 Social work enables improvement in capacity building and sustainability of targeted poverty alleviation

In terms of social work practice, social work's unique contribution to targeted poverty alleviation lies in “specific spot” innovation. Services are provided for a particular community or an impoverished rural household in a bottom-up demand-orientated approach, which prevents these services from missing the target, a problem that troubles government's top-down approach. During this process, the role of social work should advance from shallow-level participation to in-depth engagement. From a long-term perspective, community development should abandon the existing short-term operation model and form a whole service system covering needs assessment, media, service objects, service goals and actions. Only by truly applying social work to the eco-system of targeted poverty alleviation can we give full play to its capacity of resource integration, properly combine the short-term goal of targeted poverty alleviation with the long-term goal of rural community development and the even-longer goal of rural population's self-development, and eventually realize targeted poverty alleviation and sustainable development. Social work enabled targeted poverty alleviation also helps to

improve rural government officials' competence in social work. Also, by introducing professional poverty-alleviation methods and approaches, social work effectively improves the capacity of local governance at the village and township levels.

In conclusion, social work enabled targeted poverty alleviation is conducive to effectively combining top-down and bottom-up efforts and enhancing the poverty alleviation policies' insufficient endogenous power and social engagement caused by top-down execution of

the government's goals. From the perspective of eco-system, social work enabled targeted poverty alleviation focuses on the interactions between individuals and environmental elements, and the interaction within and between systems. Highlighting professional efficacy, this approach helps uncover the roots of poverty in an all-round and profound way, efficiently and systematically implement targeted poverty alleviation policies, and build an eco-system for rural poverty alleviation and sustainable development.

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