

Forty-Year Development of Social Assistance System in China: Review and Outlook

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Abstract: This paper reviews the forty-year development of the social assistance system in China and discovers that under the leadership of the Chinese government, the basic framework of the social assistance system has taken shape and become a proud image of China's social security system's reform and development. The development of the social assistance system in China demonstrates the bottom-line thinking of state governance and its multi-tiered, cross-sector and community-focused characteristics. At its present stage of growth the social assistance system is actively developing multiple means of assistance and will be based on the objective of "supporting the vulnerable."

Keywords: social assistance system; social assistance subject; social security system; supporting the vulnerable

Judging from the history of modern social assistance development, countries around the world generally develop their social assistance from basic life assistance services to a variety of special assistance services. Subsequently, within a social assistance framework, they promote the consolidation of a corresponding system through legislation. Such systematization is a long and complicated process. The development of a social assistance system should satisfy the needs of assistance objects, be a tool of state governance, meet the demands of domestic economic and social development. Thus, this development usually features a diversity of development concepts, characteristics and routes. Over the past 40 years, China has established and improved its 8+1 framework of social assistance system, formed a new assistance landscape and has continually improved its operating mechanisms. Thanks to this, China has opened a way for the development of a social assistance system with Chinese characteristics.

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1. The development of the social assistance system in China over the past 40 years

1.1 1978-1992: Putting the development of China's social assistance system on the right track

One highlight of this period was the establishment of relevant social assistance authorities under the Ministry of Civil Affairs of the PRC. Since then, the top-down development of social assistance has been managed by a competent sector.

On March 5, 1978, the First Session of the Fifth National People's Congress approved the re-establishment of the Ministry of Civil Affairs. Following this, seven departmental-level units were established. Among them were the Department of Rural Social Relief and the Department of Urban Social Welfare, which were respectively responsible for rural and urban social relief. The development and management of national social assistance has since been managed by corresponding competent authorities. Meanwhile, civil affairs sectors at all levels nationwide quickly established specialized social assistance agencies. Thus, the development of the social assistance system in China developed on the right track.

During this period, with the extensive implementation of the Household Responsibility System (a household contract responsibility system with remuneration linked to output) in rural China, the functions of collective economic organizations were on the wane, while rural poverty relief was elevated in importance. Social assistance then mainly included three aspects. The first was exploration of regular quota assistance, which primarily targeted rural households that have been living in extreme poverty for years, the elderly (particularly those with no family), the sick, the disabled, and the unemployed. The basic life support of the rural population living below the poverty line was directly ensured with a certain fixed amount of relief funds, food and other in-kind subsidies timely appropriated on a monthly or quarterly basis. The second aspect was continual improvements of the support and assistance of households entitled for the "five guarantees" (i.e. childless and infirm old persons who are guaranteed food, clothing, medical care, housing and burial expenses by the communes). The third aspect was development-oriented rural poverty alleviation.^①

Also, urban social assistance was experiencing rapid expansion and development. In November 1979, the Ministry of Civil Affairs held a conference on national urban social relief and welfare work, debating how urban social relief and welfare work could better serve socialist modernization. The policies and measures concluded at the conference mainly concerned two areas. The first was infrastructure construction. More specifically, the Chinese government-built welfare agencies such as welfare homes, nursing homes and psychiatric hospitals in cities and towns, and nursing homes in rural area. The second area was relief standards. The Chinese government made multiple adjustments to the urban social relief standards, specifying that the primary urban targets were to be the old (particularly those with no family), the disabled and the young who had no one to depend on and no source of income, and other impoverished urban residents without a regular job or stable incomes.

In general, social assistance during this period echoed the call of reform in the socialist market economy, exhibited transitional features, established the basic role of social assistance, and paved the way for later developments.

① Liu, 2010, pp.21-28.

1.2 1992-2007: The formation of the foundations of the social assistance system

This period was primarily marked by the extensive implementation of subsistence allowances systems for urban and rural residents. Also, progress was made in medical assistance, educational assistance, housing assistance, and other specialized systems.

1.2.1 Six-year developing a subsistence allowances system for urban residents

In the early 1980s, China's economic reform entered a critical stage, giving rise to a range of social problems, such as enterprise bankruptcies, factory shutdowns or production reductions, unemployment and excessive inflation. In such a context, workers formed a main part of the urban population living below the poverty line and their number rose year on year.^① To support the reform of state-owned enterprises, *Notice on the Subsistence Allowances Line for the Urban Residents of Shanghai* was jointly issued by the Shanghai Municipal Civil Affairs Bureau, the Municipal Finance Bureau and other bureaus in early 1993 and was implemented municipality-wide in that June. Later, subsistence allowances systems for urban residents were successively introduced in Xiamen, Qingdao, Dalian, Fuzhou, Guangzhou, Wuxi and other places.^②

In September 1997, the State Council issued *Notice on Establishing a Subsistence Allowances System for Urban Residents in China*, which for the first time specified a timetable for this task's advancement. Deadlines were specified. By the end of 1997 cities which had already established a system should step-by-step improve it and cities which had not yet established a system should prepare for its establishment as quickly as possible. By the end of 1998 all cities at and above the prefecture level should complete the establishment of a system and by the end of 1999 all county-level cities and county seats should complete the establishment of a system. The issuing of this notice promoted the basic development of a nationwide social assistance system. Moreover, the establishment of a subsistence allowances system for urban residents was also included in the *Proposal of the CPC Central Committee for the Ninth Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and the Long-Range Objectives to the Year 2010*, becoming a key task advanced by the Chinese government during the Ninth Five-Year Plan period. As of September 1999 subsistence allowances systems had covered 668 cities and 1,638 county seats across China.^③

On September 28, 1999 the State Council promulgated *Regulations on Subsistence Allowances for Urban Residents*. Its announcement and implementation indicated that China's subsistence allowances system for urban residents became a legal track and that a major breakthrough had been made in the development of social assistance systems.

1.2.2 Fifteen-years of building a subsistence allowances system for rural residents

In 1992, the pilot program of subsistence allowances system for rural residents was initiated in Yangquan, Shanxi province.^④ In December 1996, the General Office of the Ministry of Civil Affairs issued *Opinions on Accelerating the Building of a Rural Social Security System and Guidelines for the Building of a Rural Social Security System*, which marked the start of the nationwide development of a subsistence allowances system for rural residents. From 1996 to 1997 the provincial-level governments of Jilin, Guangxi, Gansu, Henan and Qinghai successively issued relevant documents stipulating that funds for promoting the building

① Tang, 1998, pp. 118-119.

② Song, Zhong & Zheng, 1998, p. 154.

③ Chen & Wang, 2004, p. 30.

④ Wang, 2015, p. 38.

of a subsistence allowances system for rural residents should be appropriated from village reserves and overall township planning funds. As of 2002, the subsistence allowances system for rural residents had been introduced to most provincial-level administrative divisions (provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities directly under the central government), benefiting a population of 4.04 million nationwide. Its annual expenditure reached RMB 1.36 billion, of which RMB 953 million was from local governments and RMB 407 million was from rural collective funds.^①

In 2004, China began to accelerate its subsistence allowances system expansion. In January 2004, the CPC Central Committee and the State Council jointly issued *Opinions on Several Policies to Promote an Increase of Farmers' Incomes*, requiring "regions (if possible) to pioneer the building subsistence allowances systems for rural residents." In December 2005, the CPC Central Committee and the State Council jointly issued *Opinions on Promoting the Construction of a New Socialist Countryside*, specifying the gradual development of a rural social security system and further requiring "regions (if possible) to take the initiative to build a subsistence allowances system for rural residents."^② In October 2006 the Sixth Plenary Session of the 16th CPC Central Committee was held and proposed the improvement of the public fiscal system, to equalize basic public services step by step, increase national financial investments, continue enhancing the supply of public products and services, and eventually build a subsistence allowances system for rural residents. On July 11, 2007, the State Council issued *Notice on Establishing a Subsistence Allowances System for Rural Residents*, specifying this system's objectives, general requirements, standards, applicable targets, management-style standardization, allowances allocation and other aspects.

In 2007, a special subsidy of RMB 3 billion was appropriated from the Central Government's budget to the subsistence allowances system for rural residents, bringing this system into the stage of full-implementation. As of September 2007, the subsistence allowances system for rural residents has covered 2,777 agriculture-related counties (county-level cities and districts) in 31 provincial-level administrative divisions (provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities directly under the Central Government).^③ The establishment of the subsistence allowances systems for urban and rural residents has met the most basic needs of both urban and rural residents and demonstrated the Chinese government's ability to responsibly help the vulnerable in society. Thus, the subsistence allowances systems for urban and rural residents were established as a primary part of China's social assistance system. Their establishment also marked the completion of the most critical stage of the development of the social assistance system in China.

1.2.3 Emphasis on and development of specialized assistance systems concerning medical services, education, housing and other aspects

In November 2003, *Opinions on the Implementation of a Rural Medical Assistance System* was jointly issued by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the Ministry of Health (currently the National Health Commission) and the Ministry of Finance. According to the *Opinion*, while extensively building a rural medical assistance system, the Chinese government could select 2-3 counties (county-level cities) as demonstration bases to guide and advance rural medical assistance work; a sound and complete medical assistance system in rural China was

① Liu, 2010, pp. 21–28.

② Wang, 2015, p. 38.

③ Wu, 2014, p. 5.

expected to be established by 2005.

With more emphasis placed on building a rural medical assistance system, the building of an urban medical assistance system was put on the agenda. In March 2005 the General Office of the State Council forwarded *Opinions on the Pilot Work of Building an Urban Medical Assistance System*, which was jointly issued by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Finance, proposing to provide medical assistance for needy residents in the forms of non-governmental funding, appropriate subsidies from urban medical assistance funds, and voluntary fee waivers from certain medical institutions. As of the end of 2008, all counties (county-level cities and districts) across China had established urban and rural medical assistance systems, which means they had full coverage for both urban and rural residents. Although starting late, China developed its urban and rural medical assistance at a rapid pace and generated remarkable assistance effects. In addition, in order to tackle the problems of housing, education and other temporary emergencies facing the population living below the poverty line, the civil affairs sector in collaboration with other related sectors, established and implemented specialized assistance systems concerning housing, education and other aspects.

The effective implementation of these specialized social assistance systems complement the subsistence allowances systems for urban and rural residents and together form joint assistance power.

1.3 2007-2014: The improvement of a temporary assistance system—a key part of the social assistance system

This period was marked by the State Council's issuing the *Notice on Further Establishing and Perfecting a Temporary Assistance System* in 2014.

In 2007, the Ministry of Civil Affairs began to build a temporary assistance system nationwide to tackle temporary basic living difficulties that resulted from emergencies, accidental injuries or unaffordable rigid family expenditures. As of the end of 2013, within just five years, 26 provincial-level administrative divisions quickly introduced and improved their temporary assistance policies.

In October 2014 the State Council issued *Notice on the Establishment of a Temporary Assistance System in All Respects*, advancing the temporary assistance system nationwide. The temporary assistance is a type of transitional emergency assistance provided by the Chinese government for families or individuals who are in basic living difficulty resulting from emergencies, accidental injuries, critical illnesses or other special causes, and who are not yet covered by or beyond the coverage of other social assistance systems. The temporary assistance focuses on “emergencies” and mainly targets two situations. First, it targets uncertain risks from all sides, namely, all types of unpredictable, occasional sudden disastrous events. Second, it targets the deficiencies of other assistance programs and supplements them. Such deficiencies include other programs' failure to assist or insufficient assistance. Thus, with its weak part (temporary assistance) strengthened, China's multi-tiered social assistance system was established.

1.4 2014-present: The integration and optimization of the social assistance system

This period has seen the enactment of *Interim Measures for Social Assistance*. The basic framework of the social assistance system has taken shape, social assistance resources from multiple sectors have been integrated, and corresponding operating mechanisms have been improved.

In February 2014 the State Council promulgated the *Interim Measures for Social Assistance*, which were the first administrative regulations on the following eight social assistance systems: subsistence allowances,

support of those living in extreme poverty, assistance for disaster victims, medical assistance, educational assistance, housing assistance, employment assistance and temporary assistance. This *Interim Measures* also enabled the establishment of a social assistance system with Chinese characteristics, which features civil administrative coordination, labor division and cooperation with individual responsibility, as well as the combination of governmental assistance with non-governmental participation. It marked the completion of China's building of a social assistance system and the beginning of a new stage for consolidation and development.

Furthermore, in order to integrate the ministerial-level horizontal intergovernmental relations of social assistance, enhance cross-sector collaboration, tackle major challenges facing the administrative work of social assistance and advance the development of the national social assistance system in a balanced way, China established a coordination mechanism, i.e. an inter-ministerial joint conference for social assistance in August 2013. Since February 2017, county-level government coordination mechanisms for meeting the most basic needs of those living below the poverty line have been successively established across China. After China's forty-year development of its social assistance system the Chinese government has the ability to accelerate this cause by reinforcing its sense of responsibility by forming joint powers of social assistance. In terms of assistance systems designs, the Chinese government first introduced a subsistence allowances system, then built and improved various specialized assistance systems, and finally introduced a temporary assistance system, thereby building a multi-tiered social assistance system in a systematic way. In terms of assistance resources utilization, the approach has been transformed from isolated utilization of resources among government sectors to centralized utilization of resources. In terms of urban-rural social assistance development the approach has been transformed from an urban-rural dual system to an urban-rural coordinated system. When it comes to the subject of the dominant player, the previous government domination has been replaced by a government-led public-private partnership, giving rise to a new landscape characterized by active non-governmental participation.^①

2. The establishment and improvement of the social assistance system: Concept, characteristics and approach

2.1 Demonstrating the bottom-line thinking of state governance

2.1.1 Targeting people's well-being and supporting the vulnerable

The social assistance system is a basic institutional arrangement which meets basic living needs, ensures people's well-being, and promotes equality. The long-term development of the social assistance system attaches great importance to the combination of "full coverage" with "preferential support." The social assistance system covers all households living below the poverty line and at the same time gives preferential support to all households trapped in sudden and temporary life difficulties. The formulation of assistance standards ensures that "meeting basic living needs" are in line with local economic and social development. While satisfying the assistance targets' basic living needs, the standards also facilitate the sustainable development of social assistance, helping to build a new social assistance system featuring full coverage with

① Dou, 2014.

multi-tiered in-depth permeation.

2.1.2 Safeguarding China's national economic reform and social development to underpin state governance

Over the past forty years, China has established a social security framework adaptive to the socialist market economy, and has developed a social security system based on social insurance, social assistance and social welfare that focuses on basic old-age pensions, basic medical care and subsistence allowances, and is supplemented by charities and commercial insurance. This is so far a major accomplishment of China's reform of social security system. Social assistance, being a fundamental and major component of the social security system, puts a floor under our society, meeting the Chinese people's basic living needs and maintaining social stability.

Particularly in recent years, during the modernization of the state governance system and governance capacity, governments at all levels have reached a consensus on accelerating the building of China's social assistance system. This consensus enables increasing financial inputs from governments at all levels into social assistance areas, accelerates the building of a social assistance system, and helps promote a variety of community-level assistance platforms in urban and rural China as a window to showcase the commitment to "exercising power in the interests of the people with love."

2.2 Featuring "multi-tiered, cross-sector and community-focused characteristics"

2.2.1 The multi-tiered building of a social assistance system

In order to safeguard Chinese citizens' basic living rights and interests, the *Interim Measures for Social Assistance*, based on existing regulations, further specified relevant social assistance items (see chart below) in accordance with the principles of being adaptive to economic and social development and aligned with other social security systems. Subsistence allowances and support of persons living in extreme poverty focus on meeting basic living needs with medical assistance, housing assistance and educational assistance that target special issues. Temporary assistance aims at emergencies and non-governmental participation helps to solve highly individualistic problems.

2.2.2 The cross-sector integration of a social assistance system

In order to integrate the ministerial-level horizontal intergovernmental relations of social assistance, enhance cross-sector collaboration, tackle major challenges facing the administrative work of social assistance and advance the building of the national social assistance system through top-down design, the State Council approved the establishment of a coordination mechanism, i.e. an inter-ministerial joint conference for social assistance in August 2013. This joint conference aims to research and map out social assistance-related major systems, policies, structures and mechanisms, advise the State Council, promote effective coordination and alignment of policies on social assistance (subsistence allowances, medical services, education and other areas) and policies on job-creation and development-oriented poverty alleviation, work on cross-sector sharing of the applicant's economic status check, supervise, and guide and promote the development of social assistance systems nationwide. The joint conference is led by the Ministry of Civil Affairs and has 23 member sectors and units (Ministry of Civil Affairs, Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee, State Commission Office for Public Sector Reform, Office of the Central Rural Work Leading Group, National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Public Security, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, etc.)

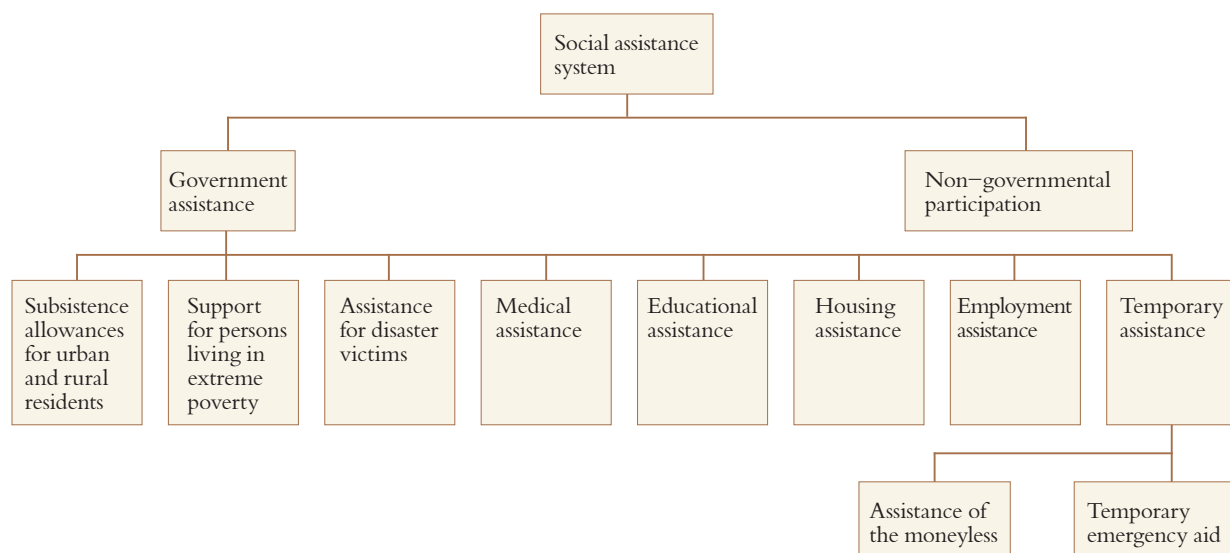
In January 2017, the General Office of the State Council issued *Notice on Strengthening the Work Related*

to *Ensuring the Basic Living of People in Financial Difficulties*, requiring all counties (county-level cities and districts) to establish and improve a work coordination mechanism for meeting the basic living needs of people in financial difficulty. The mechanism should be led by the civil affairs sector of the government and engage relevant sectors and units. Also, it should regularly research and tackle challenges facing this task. Judging from the actual operation over the past years, the inter-ministerial joint conference for social assistance and the work coordination mechanism for meeting the basic living needs of people in financial difficulty have managed to enhance cross-sector collaboration and integrate ministerial-level horizontal intergovernmental relations of social assistance.

2.2.3 The building of the social assistance system: Being community-focused

First, the Chinese government built “one-stop comprehensive and coordinative” platforms for administrative business-handling at the community level. Across China, the government set up unified “service windows for social assistance” at the service halls of subdistrict offices (or town/township governments), public-service stations of neighborhood committees (or village committees), and other comprehensive public-service sites; formulated standard processes for the separate and transferred handling of social assistance applications, and set a time limit for business-handling. Thus, most counties (county-level cities and districts) in China realized “one-stop” instant settlement of medical assistance services. Second, the Chinese government purchased social assistance services and improved the capacity of social assistance-related business handling at the community level. In September 2017, *Opinions on Actively Promoting Government’s Purchase of Services and Strengthening the Community-level Capacity of Social Assistance Work Handling* was jointly issued by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the State Commission Office for Public Sector Reform, the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security. The *Opinions* exposed the community-level agencies’ long-standing poor capacity of social assistance-related business handling, which was characterized by staff and fund shortages, single work patterns and low efficiency and which contributed to occasional failures to underpin and ensure social assistance in some regions. The *Opinions* required government authorities

Chart China’s 8+1 Framework of the Social Assistance System



to improve their public service delivery, adopt the model of service-purchase by government, encourage non-governmental participation, improve the capacity of social assistance-related business handling at the community level, and tackle the “last mile” challenge facing social assistance services.

2.3 Exploring a right approach to the development of a comprehensive social assistance system

2.3.1 Developing multiple social assistance subjects

China is gradually replacing its previous single social assistance subject (government) with multiple subjects, namely, various governmental and non-governmental subjects, including government sectors, social organizations, enterprises, public undertakings and individuals. China also effectively integrates resources (manpower, goods, capital, information and infrastructure) from relevant systems and sectors, broadens fund-raising channels such as government investments and beginning to form a joint institutional force featuring civil administrative coordination, inter-sector collaboration, upper-lower interaction, non-governmental participation, diversified fund-raising and unified assistance, all of which will make up for the undersupply of previous single social assistance subjects.

2.3.2 Adopting combined assistance means

China's social assistance has been delivered primarily in the forms of cash or goods. Although such forms are easy to operate and manage, they can lead to a lack of diversity in assistance means and an overlook of assistance effects. In practice, single social assistance means are unable to satisfy various assistance needs originating from different and diversified assistance targets, and unable to take targeted supporting measures against the assistance targets' difficulties and corresponding causes.

Recently, during the development of the social assistance system, China has prioritized the enrichment of social assistance connotations as a key task of social assistance system reform, emphasized the government approach to the purchase of social assistance services, entrusted or contracted some temporary transactional services to social organizations, professional social work agencies and competitive market players. China also encourages social work agencies, professional social workers and volunteers to participate in social assistance. This is to further enrich the connotations of social assistance services, transform the assistance means from traditional goods and cash to combined assistance means (an integration of material guarantees, life care, mental support, psychological counseling, ability enhancement and social inclusion), make social assistance patterns more diversified, integrated, professional and individualized, and give full play to social assistance's comprehensive utility.^①

3. Major trends in the development of the social assistance system in China

3.1 Promoting the transformation of the social assistance system with the new objective of “supporting the vulnerable”

In President Xi Jinping's report at the 19th CPC National Congress, he stated, “(We must) ensure and improve living standards through development. The wellbeing of the people is the fundamental goal of development. We must do more to improve the lives and address the concerns of the people and use development to strengthen areas of weakness and promote social fairness and justice.” The report added two

^① Dou, 2014.

new items, “childcare” and “social assistance” to the previous improvement scope of “education, employment, medical services, elderly care and housing.” In particular, the new item “social assistance” would grow into a theme of the times for future development, help extend the scope of ensuring and improving people’s living standards and create an opportunity for the development of an expanded social assistance system.

The inclusion of “social assistance” in the report would enlarge China’s target scope of poverty alleviation from the current population in absolute poverty to the population in relative poverty. While extending the scope of ensuring and improving people’s living standards this move is also expected to improve China’s goal of poverty alleviation, promote policy interventions for the vulnerable from a perspective of multi-dimensional poverty and focus on tackling major challenges such as development-resulted poverty and intergenerational transmission of poverty.^①

3.2 Introducing positive ideas for social assistance and creating an “activation-oriented” social assistance system

Social assistance means generally falls into two categories, i.e. “blood transfusion” and “blood production.” The “blood transfusion” category refers to long-term direct social assistance to the target from external forces. In developed countries, “blood transfusion” is usually applied to the vulnerable who are unable to work. By contrast, the “blood production” category emphasizes on stimulating the assistant target’s initiative to shake off poverty and integrate into the society after receiving assistance and relief for a certain period. Over the past decade, a consensus on social assistance reform has been reached among developed countries. An analysis of this consensus and its development trend indicates that assistance and relief programs for the vulnerable with labor capacity are of a temporary nature and that corresponding assistance and relief means are of a transitional nature. The “standard approach” should be employment or reemployment-enabled poverty elimination and self-reliance. The key to the transformation from “blood transfusion” assistance to “blood production” assistance lies in the introduction of effective employment-boosting means and targeted measures. For example, relevant authorities can improve vocational training targeting vulnerable group with labor capacity and provide targeted employment assistance and help.

China should improve the “activation” objective of its social assistance system in an all round way. It should transform its assistance objective from meeting the target’s basic living needs to lifting the target permanently out of poverty and giving play to their potential. During the implementation of social assistance classifications, China should uphold its active direction of social assistance reform. First, it should meet the basic living needs of assistance targets without labor capacity in a long-term comprehensive manner, ensure this most troubled group’s basic living, help them plan their life and improve their independence. Second, China should meet the basic living needs of assistance targets who are above legal working age and with labor capacity in a temporary transitional manner, encourage them to receive training and take a job on a voluntary basis, regularly evaluate their performance, and prepare them for future development with more confidence and hope.

China’s social assistance system remains in a process of optimization and development. The system needs to be equipped with the idea of “blood production” assistance to give play to its positive functions. China should further execute the income tax exemption and perfect the exit-mechanism for assistance targets and it

① Lin, 2018, 42–46.

should implement social assistance classifications and give full play to market mechanisms to promote social assistance and to strike a balance among the assistance's scope, efficiency and liquidity.

3.3 Accelerating the legalization of social assistance to promote the consolidation of social assistance systems in all respects

It is a universal practice among countries across the world to prioritize the formulation of social assistance-related laws. Given that of all social laws, social assistance law is the most primary and fundamental, social assistance-related laws are extensively valued by countries across the world and are usually among the first batch of social security laws formulated. In recent years, China has continually improved its framework of social laws, successively enacting *Labor Law of the PRC*, *Labor Contract Law of the PRC*, *Law of the PRC on the Protection of Minors*, *Law of the PRC on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly*, *Law of the PRC on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women* and *Law of the PRC on the Protection of Disabled Persons*. Thanks to these laws these vulnerable and impoverished groups' basic rights and interests are protected. In the social security area alone, *Social Insurance Law of the PRC* was adopted on October 28, 2010 and entered into force on July 1, 2011; *Charity Law of the PRC* was adopted on March 16, 2016 and entered into force on September 1, 2016. Compared with other social security laws, *Social Assistance Law of the PRC* obviously lags in terms of legislation. The absence of *Social Assistance Law* has now become a weak area in China's system of social security laws. In recent years, fundamental changes have taken place in the economic and social conditions for ensuring and improving people's wellbeing. At present, China is battling against poverty in poverty-stricken rural areas, ensuring people's access to social assistance during the advancement of building a moderately prosperous society in all respects, and opening a time window for accelerating social assistance legislation. Moreover, the new round of in-depth reform of the CPC and government institutions, which was initiated in March 2018, has put forward new requirements on *Social Assistance Law*. Through this reform, the National Healthcare Security Administration was established, which integrated a range of other related functions, including basic medical insurance (previously under the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security), the new rural cooperative medical system (NCMS) (previously under the National Health Commission), medical assistance (previously under the Ministry of Civil Affairs) and medical price-setting (previously under the National Development and Reform Commission). This institutional reform also saw the establishment of the Ministry of Emergency Management of the PRC, which integrated disaster-relief functions (previously under the Ministry of Civil Affairs), including provision for basic life assistance for disaster victims. For social assistance management, the institutional reform has brought about more administrative sectors and certain changes in administrative operating systems. To meet the requirements of the institutional reform, China should enact *Social Assistance Law* as soon as possible, further improve the management systems and operating mechanisms of social assistance and increase the operating efficiency of the social assistance system.

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