

An Analysis of the Anti-Poverty Strategies and Mechanisms in China: In the Case of Shibadong Village

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Abstract: In the context of China's nationwide efforts to combat poverty, this essay focuses on the transformative journey of Shibadong Village, which was once impoverished but eventually became one of the most influential and inspiring cases of China's successful poverty alleviation strategy. Through a comprehensive analysis of the village's background, government initiatives, socio-economic transformation, and implementation of related policies, this essay highlights the key factors that contributed to its success. The essay also examines the significant impact on the quality of life for the villagers, including improvements in income levels, education, healthcare, and overall well-being. Furthermore, it discusses the lessons learned from this case study and the potential to replicate the village's success in different regions or countries. By shedding light on this remarkable example, the essay highlights the importance of continuing poverty alleviation efforts and provides valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners striving to uplift communities worldwide.

Keywords: China, poverty alleviation, anti-poverty, grass-root governance

1. Introduction

China's economic power has grown rapidly. Since the Reform and Opening up in 1978, its GDP has grown from US\$163.432 billion in 1978 to US\$14687.674 billion in 2020 [1]. China's ability to participate in global economic governance has also become more abundant than ever. In 2015, at the Sustainable Development Summit, the United Nations formally adopted 17 sustainable development goals. Building on the Millennium Development Goals, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) make a historic promise: the overarching goal is to eradicate poverty forever in every corner of the world [2]. Poverty alleviation, as one of the essential foundations for achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and promoting human well-being, has become a focus of global economic governance. Meanwhile, in response to the UN initiative, for China, contributing to the reduction of world poverty is a sensible entry point to participate in global economic governance. More importantly, since China first proposed the "Targeted Poverty Alleviation" strategy in 2013 [3], China's poverty alleviation work has achieved great success. Dr Gauden Galea, the representative of the World Health Organization in China, affirmed China's poverty alleviation achievements and pointed out: "China has been an active advocate and strong promoter of global poverty reduction. We expect China to make further achievements in global poverty reduction [4]."

According to China Daily, accompanied with an average annual increase 20 percent higher than that of people in rural areas, the per capita net income of the registered poor rose from 2,982 yuan in 2015 to 10,740 yuan in 2020 [5]. As a result, the models adopted in China's poverty alleviation, successful experiences, difficulties encountered in the development process, and related solutions have become topics of great research value. As one of the most famous poverty alleviation cases in China, the success of Shibadong Village has received strong propaganda from the Communist Party of China. Various provinces, cities, and departments have extensively studied the successful experience of poverty alleviation in Shibadong Village [6]. Therefore, as a "model of national poverty alleviation", Shibadong Village is representative of China's overall poverty alleviation model. Based on the case study of Shibadong Village, this paper argues that the combination of an overall policy of adapting measures to local conditions, perfecting support measures, and reforming the grassroots governance model has contributed to the achievement of poverty alleviation governance in Shibadong Village.

In the first part of this paper, this paper will introduce the basic background of Shibadong village and analyze the causes of widespread and deep poverty in Shibadong village. The second section will introduce the Chinese government's overall policies and corresponding supporting measures in accordance with local conditions. The third part will, based on the previous content, analyze the reform of the grass-roots governance system to promote the implementation of policies. Finally, on the basis of the previous content, this paper will summarize the experience of Shibadong Village in the process of poverty alleviation and reflect on its replicability and universality.

2. The Background of Shibadong Village

Shibadong Village, previously a typical poor village in China with typical causes of poverty, is worth studying as an example of the successful implementation of the "Targeted poverty alleviation" strategy. First, the geography of Shibadong Village is complex. It is located in Huayuan County, which is at the junction of Hunan, Guizhou, and Chongqing provinces [7]. The geography of China's most impoverished regions is similar. Due to the unclear division of labor in cross-provincial management and the lack of a clear person in charge, the problems in Shibadong Village are usually difficult to solve and the needs are difficult to implement [8]. At the same time, transport between the local area and the outside world is highly inconvenient due to the hilly terrain and economic backwardness. Until 2013, the road from Shibadong Village to the county town was still a "dirt road" with compacted soil [9]. Commonly combined with rainy years, local land loss is severe, and the ecology is fragile, resulting in severe resource shortages. China produced 447.8 kg of rice per mu in 2013, while Shibadong village barely produced more than 100 kg per mu [10].

Second, the long lag in the economic development of Shibadong has resulted in an imbalanced population structure in Shibadong. In 2011, the per capita net income of Shibadong Village was 1,280 yuan. This only accounts for 19.49% of the per capita net income of farmers in Hunan Province and even 18.35% of farmers in the whole country [8]. The improvement of the village economy is not based on collective efforts, but on isolated individual efforts. To earn a higher income than farming, the main source of income for villagers is to become migrant laborers. In Shibadong Village, which has less than 1,000 people, more than 600 people have left their homes [8]. The massive loss of young and middle-aged labor has created a severe imbalance in the population ratio in Shibadong, leaving the village with only the elderly and children. More importantly, the resulting "left-behind children problem" makes it difficult for children growing up in Shibadong Village to receive qualified education. As of 2013, the village's primary school still has only two teachers [11]. "Superficially completing compulsory education and then leaving home to work as a migrant worker, sending meager salaries to the elderly at home every month" has become a vicious circle around the residents of Shibadong Village.

3. “Targeted Poverty Alleviation Strategy” and Its Supporting Measures

The “Targeted poverty alleviation” strategy provides fundamental guidance for the poverty alleviation work of Shibadong Village. In November 2013, the Chinese government put forward the concept of “targeted poverty alleviation” for the first time. “Seek truth from facts, adapt measures to local conditions, provide targeted guidance, and be meticulous” these four principles thus, became the key factors to reduce China’s poor population [12]. In the same year, Shibadong Village and other impoverished villages in western Hunan have become the pilot sites for this strategy. In the case of Shibadong Village, this strategy is reflected in the following three aspects. First, the local government accurately defines the objects of poverty alleviation by establishing detailed evaluation criteria [8]. To avoid favoritism and corruption, and reduce the cost of alleviation, the local government has introduced non-admission policies for assessing assistance targets. People who are poor but prone to gambling, for example, are not allowed to be rated as alleviation targets. Meanwhile, the village government has established a complete evaluation process and ensured fairness through multiple methods of public opinion supervision, such as publicity on the list and public comments. The village government has set up standard steps for the selection of poor households, dividing the whole process from self-application to approval into seven steps. To avoid nepotism, the village handed the power to evaluate poor households to the masses and implemented democratic evaluation and democratic supervision throughout the process. At the end of the selection, the village government will publicize the list of poor households that have passed the review and accept and respond to the feedback of the masses. This formula process will be publicized repeatedly to ensure adequate explanation and response to the doubts of the masses. In the end, a total of 136 poor households with 542 people were identified in Shibadong Village, and all the villagers agreed [6].

Second, to address the root causes of poverty, the meagre industry and the unreasonable use of resources, the village government has formulated poverty alleviation industries based on the local climate conditions and natural resources. First, they considered that investing and starting a business on an individual basis requires a large initial investment and a high risk, which is not suitable for villagers in Shibadong, who generally have low economic capacity. Therefore, Shibadong Village established a village collective cooperative, investing in the name of the cooperative, and with the help of state finance, it cooperates with enterprises brought in by the government [8]. This not only ensures the source of funds but also ensures the safety of the project to a certain extent. For example, the farmland in the village is scarce, so the local leaders organized the villagers to invest in the county’s agricultural science and technology park through industrial support funds and self-raised funds and concentrated on planting high-quality kiwifruit [8]. Compared with Shibadong Village, which has poor soil and scarce arable land resources, with only 0.83 mu of arable land per person [10], the county-level agricultural science and technology park has more concentrated and fertile land resources. At the same time, the Agricultural Science and Technology Park also has more professional planting technology. The Kiwi fruit project, which Shibadong Village invested in in 2014, started to pay dividends in 2017 under the influence of professional growing techniques and scale. The per capita dividend for the villagers was 1,000 yuan and the per capita profit for 2018 was 1,200 yuan [13]. As another example, mountain springs in Shibadong are rich in mineral elements. The village government made access to mountain spring water a condition of its shareholding and partnered with BBK Group to build the Shibadong Spring Water Plant. In 2020, the village collective dividend will reach 602,800 yuan [14].

While formulating a general poverty alleviation plan suitable for Shibadong Village according to the “targeted poverty alleviation” strategy, the Chinese government has also provided a complete set of supporting policies.

A series of supporting policies provided by the local government and the central government also played a vital role in the successful alleviation in Shibadong Village. First, the local government and the central government vigorously promote the poverty alleviation strategy of consumption: “Encourage government agencies at all levels, state-owned enterprises, financial institutions, colleges and universities, urban medical and elderly care service institutions, etc.” [15]. provides market docking for poverty alleviation industry products. In 2019, the Chinese government officially proposed the “consumption poverty alleviation” strategy to promote the consumption of products in poor areas through market connection and other means. According to data released by the poverty alleviation office, as of the end of November 2020, 164,543 poverty alleviation products have been identified in 22 provinces in the central and western regions, involving 1,857 counties and 46,426 suppliers, and have been sold for 306.94 billion yuan [15]. This policy is mainly based on the Chinese government’s strong market influence and macro-adjustment capabilities. In addition to the extremely high willingness to alleviate poverty, the Chinese government’s strong market influence and macro-adjustment capabilities also provide a prerequisite for its well-developed supporting measures for poverty alleviation. According to Zweig, in 2017, China’s central and Local governments still controlled 33% of China’s GDP. He also pointed out that China’s market always serves the state first and is under state control [16].

For example, as an important strategy to help poverty-stricken areas complete market linkage of products for poverty alleviation, the aforementioned consumption poverty alleviation strategy relies heavily on macro-control of the market by the state. It includes the following two main policies [17]:

1. Promoting government agencies at all levels and state-owned enterprises and institutions to take the lead in participating in poverty relief through consumption.
2. Promoting the establishment of a consumption poverty alleviation cooperation mechanism in the eastern and western regions.

The first one means that when a state-owned enterprise needs to purchase fruit, it must first consider buying fruit from poor areas, such as kiwifruit produced in Shibadong Village. According to statistics, in the first half of 2020, various regions and departments directly purchased more than 22 billion yuan of agricultural products from poverty-stricken areas and helped sell more than 200 billion yuan of agricultural products from poverty-stricken areas [18]. The latter means that the central government will arrange for rich cities to become donor cities and poor cities to become aid cities. For example, Shanghai, as one of the wealthiest cities in China, needs to help 101 counties (cities, districts) in the regions that located in the center and west of China, 98 of which are poor counties [19].

On this basis, Shibadong Village first took back the trademark of “Shibadong Village” through legal means, and then used the brand of Shibadong Village to operate and participate in consumption Poverty Alliance Strategy [8]. On this basis, Shibadong Village first took back the trademark of “Shibadong Village” through legal means, and then used the brand of Shibadong Village to operate and participate in the consumption poverty alleviation strategy [8]. With the help and introduction of the Xiangxi Tu and Miao Autonomous Prefecture government, Shibadong Village has cooperated with Suning.com, the fourth-ranked e-commerce brand in China, to accurately release kiwifruit and other products to the market through e-commerce. With the help of a professional e-commerce platform, Shibadong Village once set a record by selling 100,000 kilograms of kiwi fruit in one day [20].

4. Reform of the Grass-Roots Governance System

After formulating the overall poverty alleviation plan and its supporting measures based on the targeted poverty alleviation policy, how to implement and promote these plans and measures

accurately and smoothly is another challenge facing Shibadong Village. To meet this challenge, Shibadong Village has reformed its grassroots governance system.

The reform first targeted village government members and village party committee members. At the beginning of 2014, there were only three people in the Party branch of Shibadong Village, and they were all left-behind people. The average age was close to 60 years old. One had a junior high school education and two had an elementary school education. One of them was a poor household [8]. It is difficult for the aging and low-educated village committees to fully support the carrying out of poverty alleviation policies, and it is difficult to come up with innovative ideas in the face of challenges. In this context, after May 2014, Shibadong Village began to actively introduce young, well-educated talents to the village leadership. In the 2014 general election, 29-year-old Gong Haihua, who graduated from the PLA Army Aviation Academy, was elected as the village party secretary. After being selected, he showed his anxiety as well: “As an outsider, it would be impossible for people to accept me without actually doing something practical” [21]. In 2017, Long Jilong, who has rich entrepreneurial experience, was elected as the village director. At the same time, Shibadong Village has also established a “Shibadong Village Talent Pool” [8], which includes young people with ideas, ideals, capabilities, and visions in the training category of the branch.

At the national macro level, the “selection and adjustment system” implemented in 2014 provided a basis for injecting fresh blood into the leadership of Shibadong Village. The “selected students” are mainly undergraduates in universities, Communist Party members among postgraduates, outstanding student cadres, and “three good” students [22]. The organization department selects and transfers to grassroots, especially rural areas, and poor counties for training and training. As for the “selected students”, since the selection and transfer system is one of the important systems for the selection and training of cadres, becoming a selection and transfer student is a great opportunity for young civil servants to be promoted and enrich their experience. In general, the selection and transfer system, on the one hand, strengthens the flow of outstanding party members and government officials at the national level, and on the other hand, encourages young and high-quality civil servants to participate in grassroots work, objectively realizing the rejuvenation and optimization of grassroots civil servants.

With the continuous growth of party members in Shibadong Village, the public affairs surrounding targeted poverty alleviation have increased dramatically, and young civil servants have also created improved methods to divide, group, and coordinate the management of complicated targeted poverty alleviation work. The Party Branch of Shibadong Village first combined their personal advantages and divided all members into four party groups [23]. Each party group was responsible for one aspect of work—the first group was responsible for public services, the second group was responsible for rural tourism, and the third group was responsible for the agricultural industry. The fourth group is responsible for senior services.

After making improvements to the leadership structure, reforms began to target villagers’ drive for self-change. In 2016, Shibadong Village began to explore and implement the model of “villagers’ ideological and moral star management”, taking full advantages of the positive role of the Chinese traditional morality in poverty alleviation. [8]. Every six months, the village organizes an all-villager meeting, where all villagers over the age of 16 vote publicly on six aspects, including support for public welfare undertakings, law-abiding, and family virtues, and the election results are announced on the spot. According to the number of points, they are rated two-star to five-star, and they are publicly commended at the village meeting, and a star plate is hung at the door of each household for management. In this way, the motivation of villagers to participate in poverty alleviation tasks is stimulated. According to the memories of villagers Shi Jinlan, many villagers had a negative and skeptical attitude towards poverty alleviation at the beginning of poverty alleviation (Pan). For example, the village government plans to build a road in the village, and the villagers do not need to contribute money but need to participate in the construction of the road. However, numerous villagers

are inactive and hoard building resources. However, when Long Xiulin and the village cadres came up with the method of “star-level management of ideological and moral construction”, many villagers became more and more positive. For example, when Shi Liujin blocked the construction of the village power grid and only got one star, he felt very humiliated and went to the village committee that night to admit his mistake. Later, the village repaired the parking lot. Shi Liujin took the initiative to give up more than one mu of paddy field at the door [24].

5. Conclusion

Overall, the case study of Shibadong Village exemplifies China’s successful poverty alleviation model, demonstrating the effectiveness of adapting measures to local conditions, perfecting support measures, and reforming the grassroots governance system. By delving into the background and causes of poverty in Shibadong Village, through a combination of overall policies and tailored supporting measures, this report sheds light on the comprehensive approach taken by the Chinese government, which addressed specific challenges faced by the village, fostering remarkable progress in poverty alleviation.

Moreover, the reform of the grassroots governance system played a pivotal role in the implementation of policies. The cooperation between the introduction of youthful talents and the system of “selected students” under the national macro environment. The collaboration between government authorities and community members facilitated the delivery of targeted solutions, allowing for more efficient utilization of resources and better outcomes.

The experience of Shibadong Village offers valuable insights for other regions grappling with poverty, as it underscores the significance of context-specific interventions and the importance of empowering local communities. This model has the potential for replication in various contexts, emphasizing the need for flexibility and adaptability while maintaining the core principles of poverty alleviation governance.

However, the poverty alleviation strategy of 18 Dong Village is not perfect, and there are still many problems to be solved behind it. For example, the village infrastructure construction, the early investment of local collective industries, etc., are highly dependent on the financial help and financial support of the local government, which has considerably increased the pressure on local finances. This negative impact echoes the increasingly prominent local debt problem in China in recent years, raising new questions and requirements on how to further develop a sustainable poverty alleviation strategy.

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