

Implementation Challenges of China's Rural Living Environment Governance Policies

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Abstract:

The implementation of China's rural living environment governance policies is of great significance for the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy, promoting rural economic development, and advancing urban-rural integration. In the past few years, remarkable achievements have been made in improving the living environment. However, in the specific implementation of rural living environment policies, many problems have been exposed during the policy execution process. This article argues that there are difficulties in the process of policy implementation, such as the lack of policy cooperation networks, imbalanced allocation of policy resources, and deviation in policy implementation. The causes of these difficulties are analyzed, and it is believed that information asymmetry between superiors and subordinates, unclear rights and responsibilities between organizations have led to the dilemma of policy networks. The lack of a single source of funding and the participation of villagers have led to the problem of imbalanced resource allocation. The combined effect of these factors has exacerbated the deviation in implementation. Finally, effective countermeasures are proposed from the theoretical perspective of policy networks, including building multiple cooperation networks, increasing social participation, optimizing resource allocation, and adapting measures to local conditions to optimize these problems.

Keywords: Rural living environment governance; Policy network; Execution dilemma.

1. Introduction

The governance of rural living environment is a key link in achieving rural modernization and promoting

sustainable development, and it is also an important step for China to achieve common prosperity. As of 2021, various regions and departments have solidly promoted the three-year action plan for rural living

environment improvement, achieving important phased results. Compared to the past few decades, the living environment in rural areas of China has greatly improved, but there are still significant problems in the governance of living environment in rural areas. Although the government has continuously increased its support for rural areas in recent years, there is still a significant gap between rural areas and cities in terms of infrastructure construction and environmental governance. For example, the hygiene problem of toilets in rural areas is still prominent, and in some places, dry toilets or shabby facilities pose hidden dangers to residents' health. In addition, the garbage classification system has not yet been popularized in many rural areas, and household waste is indiscriminately piled up without effective management and disposal mechanisms, seriously affecting the cleanliness of rural environments and the quality of life of residents.

For a long time, the Chinese government has attached great importance to the rural living environment, and the Party Central Committee has also issued a series of policies to promote the governance of rural living environment. The 2018 "Three Year Action Plan for Rural Living Environment Improvement" requires the promotion of rural household waste management, toilet excreta disposal, and step-by-step promotion of rural domestic sewage treatment to accelerate the improvement of village appearance. The 2021 Five Year Action Plan for Improving Rural Living Environment (2021-2025) requires consolidating and expanding the achievements of the three-year action plan for improving rural living environment, comprehensively improving the quality of rural living environment, and providing strong support for promoting rural revitalization, accelerating agricultural and rural modernization, and building a beautiful China.

The implementation of rural living environment policies is the process of translating government policies into concrete actions and actual results. It is an important link in public management and governance, and the results it reflects are also an important manifestation of policy influence and effectiveness. By studying the problems in the implementation process of policies and analyzing them, we can provide greater reference paths and strategies for future policy implementation.

The theme of this study focuses on the implementation difficulties of China's rural living environment governance policies, aiming to deeply analyze the specific problems and their causes encountered in the policy implementation process, and explore effective solutions and strategies.

The analysis of the implementation difficulties of rural living environment policies has important theoretical significance. Firstly, it enriches the research on rural living environment governance and policy implementation, and

expands the existing research framework. Secondly, this study integrates theoretical perspectives in rural governance practices, forming a new framework and providing new theoretical support for future policy formulation and implementation.

Policy implementers can implement policies more scientifically and effectively in various places, which can help to enhance the public's sense of identity with the government and consolidate the party's governing foundation. This article provides a more detailed analysis of the implementation difficulties of rural living environment governance policies, which can provide positive impetus for the implementation of rural revitalization strategies, enhance farmers' sense of gain and happiness, and promote the comprehensive development of rural economy and society.

2. Status of Policy Implementation

Chinese rural areas have encountered difficulties in implementing policies for improving the living environment, and these difficulties have some specific characteristics.

2.1 Policy Network Dilemma

On the one hand, the policy network dilemma refers to the information asymmetry that occurs when policy makers encounter obstacles in communication and communication between policy subjects during the process of policy formulation and implementation. This information asymmetry often leads to significant deviations from the initially set goals in the final implementation of policies, and in most cases, these deviations are ultimately attributed to formalism and surface engineering issues in the implementation process. For example, some studies have shown that when implementing rural environmental governance policies, there is often a problem of unclear internal organizational division of labor among implementers, especially in the absence of cross departmental coordination mechanisms, where policy implementation becomes a "task completion" rather than actual effectiveness [1]. On the other hand, the policy network dilemma refers to the failure of policy makers, implementers, and participants to form an efficient cooperative network, resulting in a significant reduction in the effectiveness of the final policy.

The distance and information asymmetry between policy makers and implementers lead to distorted policy intentions. Unclear division of labor within the executor's internal organization can easily lead to formalism and short-term goal pressure. The policy network dilemma is also reflected in the errors in the final step of implementation, that is, the implementation of policies at the grassroots level has problems such as loose organization and lack of

long-term mechanisms. The confusion in defining responsibilities among departments, unclear division of labor, and mutual shirking of responsibilities have resulted in a “vacuum zone” in policy implementation, which has led to the failure to form an effective policy network within the government to effectively implement rural living governance and environmental policies [2].

This dilemma is particularly prominent in rural environmental governance, as environmental governance requires long-term and sustained investment, and short-term performance evaluations may force local governments to choose “quick effect” measures, ignoring long-term environmental benefits. For example, in the process of protecting the rural living environment, the local government of Chayouqianqi launched new construction projects, but neglected the later maintenance work of these projects. At the same time, due to the pressure of political achievements and personnel shortage, they did not establish a long-term effective management system, resulting in many constructions not playing a long-term role [3].

There is a gap between policy objectives and implementation effects, resulting in some policies becoming superficial projects in form. This is reflected in the implementation of rural living environment governance, where although policies are implemented by local governments, their effectiveness is often compromised due to the lack of supporting measures or implementation systems in villages and towns.

Failure to establish a cooperative network between the government and other entities during the supplementary implementation of policies will greatly reduce the effectiveness of policy implementation. Policy implementers have a wealth of theoretical knowledge, but lack a comprehensive understanding of the specific situations in different regions. Participants have specific policy demands and detailed control, but their understanding of the macro goals of policies is unclear. Without a good cooperation network, an information gap can arise between the two parties. Such communication barriers lead to strong time delays in information transmission between the two parties, resulting in ineffective policy implementation or repeated policy modifications. This can lead to doubts among participants about the stability and fairness of government policies, which can to some extent affect the smooth implementation of policies.

2.2 Policy Resource Dilemma

Resource dilemma refers to the shortage of funds and other resources during the implementation of policies.

The common problem of insufficient rural policy resources in China is the single source of funding, mainly in the

fiscal aspect. Specifically, the funding for rural living environment governance relies too much on higher-level funds, including municipal special funds and county-level subsidy funds, while social capital investment from township enterprises and social welfare funds is very scarce [4]. The single funding allocation mechanism often leads to environmental governance projects (such as sewage treatment facilities, garbage treatment stations, etc.) being unable to proceed smoothly due to a lack of long-term financial support, or being in a difficult situation of being unable to operate after completion.

Under the influence of a single source of funding, government officials often prioritize projects that demonstrate short-term results, while neglecting long-term and complex governance tasks. At the same time, the lack of transparent and scientific funding allocation standards has led to serious misallocation of resources, and even fostered corruption and resource waste. Ultimately, it leads to slow progress in rural construction and improvement, serious waste of resources, and reduced implementation effectiveness.

2.3 Deviation in Policy Implementation

Policy implementation deviation refers to the failure of policies to achieve expected results during the implementation process. Although central policies have clear objectives, in their specific implementation, policies often struggle to adapt to local realities due to natural conditions, economic development levels, and cultural differences between regions.

For example, in special natural environments such as high cold and drought, some infrastructure projects are difficult to implement, resulting in greatly reduced execution effectiveness. At the same time, the living habits and cultural traditions of ethnic minority areas have not been fully considered, resulting in obstacles in policy implementation. These factors have made policies superficial in some areas, failing to effectively address deep-seated issues in rural living environment governance and affecting the overall effectiveness of the policies. In summary, some rural living environment governance policies in China were not tailored to local conditions when formulated, ignoring the actual conditions of the locality, resulting in a significant gap between the governance effect and the original intention. The phenomenon of resource waste and surface engineering is also relatively prominent. In addition, in other processes of rural living environment in China, such as the “toilet revolution”, in the cold and water scarce rural areas of Northeast China, there will be problems with water supply, sewage, antifreeze, as well as practical problems such as insufficient pressure, blockage, and odor

caused by immature waste harmless treatment technology [5].

3. Analysis of the Causes of Execution Difficulties

3.1 The Causes of Policy Network Difficulties

The policy makers are various organizations led by the central government. The Provincial Department of Ecology and Environment and the Provincial Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs are usually responsible for coordinating resources and evaluating the performance of the next level. The real policy implementers, such as the Environmental Protection Bureau, Agriculture and Rural Affairs Bureau, Housing and Urban Rural Development Bureau, and township and village committees at the city and county levels, are directly responsible for the implementation of specific tasks such as environmental governance, domestic sewage treatment, and garbage classification at the bottom of the information transmission chain. On the one hand, policy content is tightly transmitted in a chain of layers, and the original policy intentions are inevitably distorted. The distance and information asymmetry between policy makers and frontline implementers make it difficult for the implementation level to accurately understand or execute policies; On the other hand, sometimes due to unclear division of labor goals and unclear division of responsibilities within the executor's internal organization, there may be overlapping or gaps in responsibilities in practical operations. This leads to the exhaustion of dealing with overly strict assessment standards and short-term goal pressures, prompting implementers to adopt formalism to avoid risks. For example, communities may push the implementation of garbage classification to urban management, who only focus on the amount of garbage collected, resulting in no one truly paying attention to residents' garbage classification habits. When facing problems in the end, each acting independently leads to chaos and inefficiency in the entire execution chain. In addition, grassroots governments may tend to concentrate resources in easily detectable areas to cope with assessments, neglecting long-term education and infrastructure improvement for residents. The work leaves traces everywhere, but the actual achievements are not many. In the long run, the consequence is that some party members and cadres' ideals and beliefs are shaken, their sense of purpose is indifferent, they lack the concept and emotions of the masses, and the policies themselves lack meaning, becoming mere empty words. Part of the short-term "face saving projects" have wasted a lot of manpower and financial

resources, causing unbearable suffering to rural residents with limited resources [6]. If the division of responsibilities is not fundamentally optimized, cooperation between departments is strengthened, and long-term effectiveness evaluation and assessment are emphasized, it will become a stubborn problem on the implementation path.

The low participation of villagers as target subjects can also become an important reason for obstructing effective implementation. Firstly, the education level of villagers is low, their awareness of policies is insufficient, and their participation is low. Many policy documents involve professional terminology or complex legal provisions, making it difficult for villagers with lower cultural levels to understand their specific requirements and meanings. For example, in the process of implementing garbage classification policies, some villagers are unable to understand the classification standards for different types of garbage, resulting in poor implementation effectiveness. Villagers with lower education levels usually have weak awareness of participating in public affairs and lack scientific awareness of protecting the living environment. They believe that these policies are unrelated to their own lives and lack the willingness to actively participate [7]. Especially in infrastructure construction or environmental sanitation management that requires active cooperation from villagers. Secondly, there is a lack of effective incentive mechanisms. The living conditions of rural residents are usually difficult, and even if some villagers understand the policy content, they may still be unwilling to cooperate with the implementation of the policy due to conflicts of interest or considerations of short-term interests. The content of environmental governance often involves road renovation, land use adjustment, and other matters, which may inevitably touch on the interests of some villagers in the short term, leading to a lack of motivation for them to participate, and some villagers may develop resistance as a result. Therefore, in the process of policy implementation, some villagers may adopt a passive attitude and even engage in resistance behavior, greatly increasing the difficulties for implementers [8]. For example, the progress of toilet renovation policies has been slow in some areas, partly because villagers do not believe that the new facilities will immediately improve their quality of life. The sense of achievement and expected value after completion are also far from satisfactory [9].

3.2 The Causes of Policy Funding Difficulties

The implementation of rural policies in China, especially in the governance of living environment, often relies on top-down financial support. But there are two issues in the process. Firstly, the allocation of funds is uneven. When

the central government allocates funds, due to significant differences in demand and development stages among different regions, it is difficult to achieve a completely balanced distribution of funds. Some economically underdeveloped regions, due to weak fiscal self-sufficiency and reliance on central transfer payments, sometimes fail to allocate funds in a timely manner or cannot meet actual needs, resulting in insufficient funds for policy implementation; Secondly, there is significant financial pressure on local governments. After receiving funding from higher authorities, local governments often have to match funds themselves in order to promote project implementation. However, many local governments have poor financial conditions and are unable to provide sufficient supporting funds. Even with central funding, local governments still face the dilemma of how to allocate limited resources, especially in situations where multiple development areas need to be addressed simultaneously. They tend to prioritize policies that can quickly improve their performance. For policies such as human living environment governance, there is a lack of motivation, and their funding priorities are often lower [10].

In addition to government financial support, rural living environment governance should actively introduce social funds, but this process has not yet been smoothly carried out. A large part of the reason is the lack of motivation for social capital to participate. Rural infrastructure construction and environmental governance projects usually have the characteristics of large investment and long return cycles. Social capital often lacks participation enthusiasm when entering these fields due to the inability to see short-term returns. Compared to urban infrastructure projects, rural projects have lower investment returns and lack market attractiveness, resulting in a lower level of social capital participation. Although the government has introduced some policies to encourage social capital to participate in rural construction, many policies are difficult to truly mobilize the enthusiasm of social capital due to imperfect incentive mechanisms. For example, policies such as tax incentives and subsidy mechanisms have complex procedures and limited incentives in the actual implementation process, making it difficult to attract large-scale social investment into the field of rural living environment governance.

3.3 Execution deviation

The combined impact of policy network difficulties and funding difficulties is an important reason for the deviation in the implementation of rural living environment governance. The combined effect of these two factors exacerbates the difficulty and complexity of policy imple-

mentation.

Due to poor coordination among various government departments and levels, policies often become distorted during the implementation process, with many policies remaining only in form and not truly implemented. The lack of communication between the government and villagers also makes it difficult for policies to gain widespread support and implementation from society, resulting in serious discrepancies with the original intention of the policies.

Financial difficulties hinder the acquisition of sufficient resource support for policies, resulting in a significant investment gap in rural ecological environment governance, mainly reflected in capital investment. In terms of capital investment, due to the dual structure of urban and rural areas in China, the thinking mode of “heavy on cities and light on rural areas” generally exists.

Rural and urban areas are not considered within an equal framework, but are placed beneath urban areas. Under this basic concept, there is a significant gap in investment in rural ecological environment governance [11]. Especially in projects with high funding requirements such as rural infrastructure construction, insufficient funds directly lead to the inability to complete the project on time or as required. Even if some projects are launched, they are difficult to sustain due to a lack of follow-up funding, ultimately resulting in a significant reduction in execution effectiveness.

4. Suggestions

In response to the policy network and funding difficulties in rural living environment governance, as well as the resulting execution deviations, based on the factors and their impacts in the third part above, this article proposes the following specific optimization measures.

4.1 Building a Clear Policy Network

Firstly, it is necessary to clarify the responsibilities of governments and departments at all levels, formulate detailed division of responsibilities plans, clarify the responsibilities of governments and departments at all levels in rural living environment governance, and avoid shirking responsibilities and redundant construction caused by unclear responsibilities.

Secondly, it is necessary to strengthen cross departmental and cross level coordination, establish and improve cross departmental coordination mechanisms, regularly hold joint meetings, resolve conflicts and contradictions in policy implementation, and ensure effective communication and implementation of policies from top to bottom.

Then, it is necessary to proactively build multiple collaborative networks among policy makers, implementers,

and participants. By building effective communication and collaboration platforms, information and resources between different roles can be circulated and shared, addressing challenges caused by cultural, political, and economic differences, and ensuring more comprehensive, transparent, and efficient policy-making. Enhance the flexibility and adaptability of policy response. Even when the policy environment changes, the cooperative network can adapt and adjust to maintain its stability and effectiveness due to the close connection between the three parties.

4.2 Increase Social Participation and Build a Co-governance System

Firstly, we need to strengthen publicity and education to enhance the villagers' sense of subjectivity. Through various channels such as radio, television, the internet, and village level meetings, we need to strengthen the promotion and interpretation of policies, enhance villagers' awareness of policies, and provide opportunities and platforms for farmers to learn about environmental protection. We will fully leverage the value of farmers as "community masters", advocate for equal status and value demands of villagers in the implementation of policies, guide rural residents to transform from individualization to organization, actively empower them, and improve the governance and decision-making level of rural living environment [12].

Secondly, establish incentive mechanisms. Develop policy incentives, such as establishing village level environmental governance awards or recognition systems, to encourage villagers and village officials to actively participate in the implementation of policies.

Thirdly, introduce social capital. Attract social capital to participate in rural living environment governance projects and enhance the diversity of funding sources through policy measures such as tax incentives and subsidies. Developing a new pattern of rural environmental governance through linkage and interaction between the people, social organizations, and the government, fully leveraging the collaborative and participatory functions of social organizations, improving the acceptability of government policies in practical implementation and the recognition of villagers, and promoting the smooth implementation of rural living environment governance policies [13].

4.3 Optimize Resource Allocation

Establish a scientific and reasonable fund allocation mechanism, scientifically allocate financial funds based on local actual needs and project priorities, and avoid waste and uneven distribution of funds; Strengthen the supervision of fund use, establish strict monitoring and auditing

systems for fund use, ensure that governments and departments at all levels use funds reasonably and efficiently, and prevent corruption and abuse.

4.4 Adapt to Local Conditions and Enhance Policy Adaptability

Adjust policy measures based on regional differences. Develop and adjust policy measures tailored to the economic, cultural, and geographical differences in different regions, in order to enhance the adaptability and effectiveness of policies. Optimize infrastructure, and coordinate the pace of rural living environment governance with the local economic development speed, and adapt to the development capacity. Starting from reality, make the implementation of specific policies readily accepted by villagers [14].

Promote pilot demonstrations and improve the rationality of policies. Carry out governance pilot projects in some areas, summarize experiences and lessons learned, and gradually promote them to reduce the problems that may be encountered during large-scale promotion.

Through the above measures, the policy network and funding difficulties in the current rural living environment governance can be systematically solved, reducing deviations in policy implementation and improving governance effectiveness.

5. Conclusion

Studying the implementation difficulties of China's rural living environment governance policies is of great significance for the comprehensive improvement of rural living environment quality and the promotion of the comprehensive rural revitalization strategy. From the theoretical perspective of policy networks and considering policy resources, this article focuses on the implementation difficulties of China's rural living environment governance policies. It deeply analyzes the problems and causes in the policy implementation process, and proposes targeted solutions from the aspects of relevant policy networks, co-governance system construction, rational resource allocation, and policy promotion. This study provides theoretical support and practical reference for the optimization and implementation of rural living environment governance policies. On the basis of enriching the theoretical foundation of past rural living environment governance policies, this study also provides useful reference and exploration for further improving the policy system and assisting rural revitalization. Future research could further incorporate a cooperative governance perspective or more quantitative analysis into the study, combining specific local cases to further investigate how to build a more efficient and sustainable rural living governance system.

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