

THE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY IN CHINA – SITUATION, CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract: In 2021, China eradicated extreme poverty (US\$ 1.90 per person per day) and set a new poverty target line of \$2.15 per day per person, adopted in the medium term, and \$6.8 in the long term. This corresponds the World Bank' change in statistics from September 2022, which imposed a line of \$2.15 for all countries in the world. After the adoption of a new poverty target line, China began to work with new groups outside the rural areas, which also includes the migrant working poor in small towns and on the outskirts of large cities. Poverty-tackling tools are also beginning to evolve from chronic poverty to a more diverse toolkit that covers a wider range of risks. This article includes an analysis of policies, challenges and prospects in the fight against poverty in China.

Keywords: poverty; government policy; China

1. Introduction

In 2021, China achieved its goals of eradicating extreme poverty, lifting nearly 800 million people out of this status since 1980. The percentage of the population in extreme poverty dropped from 88 % in 1980 to 0.5 % in 2020 (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2021). Simultaneously, outside of China, 1.104 million people were lifted out of extreme poverty worldwide. By 2021, there were no individuals in China earning less than 2300 yuan annually (at constant 2010 prices). However, according to the poverty definition applied to countries with higher average incomes, including China, approximately 13 % of the population still falls below the poverty line of \$ 5.50 per day. In 2020, China still had 600 million people living on less than 1000 RMB per month.

China's remarkable success in alleviating poverty can be attributed to a combination of strategic policies and determined efforts. Strong economic growth with effective governance of economic transformation and targeted pov-

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erty reduction policies were the two main pillars of the policy set applied (World Bank 2022). Geographically, poverty in China was not evenly distributed, with rural areas experiencing higher levels compared to urban centers. Recognizing this disparity, the Chinese government implemented a series of targeted policy instruments to address the root causes of poverty.

China's multifaceted approach involved investing in infrastructure, education, and healthcare in rural regions, fostering sustainable agricultural practices, and facilitating access to financial resources for impoverished communities. The government also implemented social welfare programs to provide a safety net for vulnerable populations (Malinova M. 2014: 95). These concerted efforts were crucial in uplifting millions of people and reshaping the landscape of poverty.

Despite facing challenges such as uneven economic development, rapid urbanization, and disparities in regional growth, China's commitment to poverty alleviation remained stable. China's experience serves as a testament to the importance of targeted policies, strategic planning, and persistent execution in addressing and overcoming the complex factors that contribute to poverty.

1. Factors Contributing to Poverty in China

A significant proportion of China's population residing in rural areas faces economic challenges, primarily stemming from low agricultural incomes (Fan Sh. et al. 2000: 1). The lack of land ownership further hampers rural development, as farmers encounter constraints such as terrain limitations, resource scarcity, water shortages, mobility issues, and various locational challenges. Addressing these multifaceted constraints was crucial to unlocking the economic potential of rural communities.

The household registration system (*hukou*) contributes to poverty by limiting rural residents' official job opportunities in urban areas (Kam 2020: 5). This policy forces many rural migrants into less favorable working conditions in cities, perpetuating an urban-rural divide. Overcoming the challenges imposed by the *hukou* system is vital for creating more inclusive economic opportunities and reducing disparities between urban and rural areas.

Disparities in education and healthcare outcomes arise from the decentralization of governance and the differential funding of education and health systems by local governments (Zhang 2005). Bridging the education and health gap between urban and rural regions requires comprehensive policies that ensure equitable access to quality education and healthcare services, fostering human capital development.

Structural imbalances in China's economy, characterized by a substantial trade surplus, contribute to income inequalities (Li et al. 2009: 6). The surplus stimulates the urban manufacturing sector, while rural areas face challenges in benefiting from this economic growth. Addressing these imbalances requires targeted policies to promote inclusive economic development, ensuring that the benefits of economic growth reach all segments of the population.

The limited coverage of public services, such as healthcare and education, in rural areas exacerbates the challenges faced by residents (Lee D. et al 2022: 7) (Lawton R. 2017: 137–140). Expanding the reach of these essential services to rural regions is crucial for improving living standards and empowering individuals to break free from the cycle of poverty. Comprehensive reforms in public service delivery can contribute significantly to addressing the root causes of poverty in China's rural areas.

2. China's Fight Against Poverty – Key Periods and Policies Assessment

China's relentless fight against poverty spans several crucial periods, each characterized by distinct policy initiatives aimed at addressing the multifaceted challenges.

Early Reform and Opening-Up (late 1970s – 1980s)

The initial stages of China's economic reform and opening-up policies laid the foundation for later poverty alleviation efforts. The focus was on agricultural reforms, allowing farmers more autonomy in their production decisions. The Early Reform and Opening-Up period in China, spanning the late 1970s to the 1980s, was a critical phase marked by a series of economic and agricultural reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping. These reforms aimed to transition China from a centrally planned economy to a more market-oriented one, fostering economic growth and development (Wu H. 1997: 11–13). Several instruments were implemented during this period, each with its own impact and effectiveness:

Agriculture Reform. The first land reform provided 700 mn mu^2 of land to 300 mn rural residents, which allowed them to save 35 bn kg of grain for land rent per year (Fu H. 2020: 18) (Liu S. 2019). Agriculture communes were dismantled, and households were given greater autonomy in farming decisions. Farmers could operate their own plots and make individual decisions, which

² Land unit corresponding to 1/15 of a hectare, or about 666.67 m²

resulted in a significant increase in the agricultural productivity. It provided incentives for farmers to work harder and invest in their land, contributing to a substantial boost in food production. A network of rural credit cooperatives was established.

Household Responsibility System: The Household Responsibility System (HRS) was introduced on April 2, 1980, allocating plots of land to individual households on a national scale. Farmers could sell their surplus production on the open market. HRS aligned individual interests with collective goals, driving increased productivity and fostering a sense of ownership (Fu H. 2020: 25). The shift to a more market-oriented system led to improved efficiency and output. However, since poverty was still widespread, the central government used price mechanism to improve wellbeing, by increasing the purchase price of agriculture products (Kam 2020: 359) (Wang J. 1974).

Dual-Track Pricing System: The dual-track pricing system involved maintaining state control over the prices of essential goods while allowing market prices for non-essential items. While this system helped manage the transition from central planning to a market-oriented economy, it also created distortions and inefficiencies (Wu J. et al 2016: 120 – 134). Over time, China moved toward a more market-driven pricing system to address these challenges. It established agriculture commodities markets, and introduced first measures to stimulate labor mobility.

Preliminary Social Security System: A subsistence allowance system with specific aid programs for people living in extreme poverty, consisting of five guarantees mechanisms (necessary food, clothing, shelter, healthcare, decent burial and education)³ (State Council 2021). The allowance system was first introduced in rural areas in this period, and afterwards in urban areas. It was financed by village reserve funds of rural collective funds. Some of the key problems of the system such as persistent regional disparities in the funding levels and mechanism governance across local governments lead to disparities in the effectiveness of the policy, requiring more targeted actions and intervention from the government at provincial level (Yan Zh. 2015: 785).

In 1984 the government also issued the first anti-poverty policy document – Urgent Notice on Providing Assistance to Areas with Deep Poverty. In fact, from 1982 to 1992 a poverty alleviation program was implemented in Hexi, Dingxi and Xihaigu, covering 47 counties/cities/districts and extended to 57 in

³ The National Agricultural Development Program (1956 – 1967) outlined that agricultural cooperatives had to ensure the well-being of commune members unable to work and lacking family support. This involved supplying them with adequate food, clothing, fuel, and education for children and teenagers, and burial expenses.

1992 (Fu H. 2020: 35). This area was stricken by prolonged drought and water shortage, resulted in hunger for local residents, and presenting the deepest poverty region by that time.

In 1986 the government established a leadership group (task force) for economic development in poverty-stricken areas. In 1993 this group was transformed into the country's first special government agency overseeing poverty alleviation on a national scale.

A critical change was the introduction of “Two Development Strategies” by Deng Xiaoping in 1988 (State Council 2021: 6), recommending the faster development of the coastal regions first, home to 200 million people, to open-up to the global market and profit from export-driven industries development. The government committed to assist in their swift development initially, and later, they could contribute to the progress of the inland areas.

Rural Development and Poverty Alleviation (1990s)

During this period, targeted poverty alleviation programs were introduced, emphasizing infrastructure development, education, and healthcare in rural areas. The goal was to address poverty at its roots, particularly in less developed regions, focusing on key instruments and their effectiveness.

Development of Township and Village Enterprises (TVEs): This involved encouraging the establishment of small-scale enterprises in rural areas, diversifying economic activities beyond agriculture. It played a crucial role in providing employment opportunities, boosting rural incomes, and contributing to local economic development. They helped reduce poverty by creating a more diversified and resilient rural economy. The government also invested significantly in rural infrastructure, including roads, irrigation, and electrification, to improve connectivity and enhance agricultural productivity.

Poverty Alleviation and Development Programs: In 1994 the Seven-year Priority Poverty Reduction Program was launched (1994–2000) setting a goal to increase income of 80 million low-income people in rural areas. The program aimed to ensure that all impoverished individuals had sufficient food and clothing by the year 1997. For example, the provincial government in Guangdong province only prioritized 250,000 people in 16 economically disadvantaged counties, specifically those with a per capita net income of less than RMB 1,200 (ADB East Asia 2021: 4). The implementation of targeted poverty alleviation and development programs aimed to provide financial support, education, and healthcare services to impoverished rural communities. These programs helped address the specific needs of impoverished households, including access to

education and healthcare (Yeoh E. 2012). By targeting the root causes of poverty, such initiatives contributed to sustained improvements in living standards.

Further Agriculture Reforms: 1) Land tenure reforms involved changes in land use policies, providing farmers with more secure land rights and the ability to transfer or lease their land. Secure land tenure encouraged farmers to invest in their land, leading to increased agricultural productivity. It provided a foundation for poverty reduction by empowering rural households with greater control over their economic resources. 2) The promotion of microfinance institutions and initiatives aimed to provide small loans and financial services to rural households, particularly to those engaged in agriculture and small businesses. This instrument helped stimulate economic activities at the grassroots level, allowing individuals to invest in their ventures, improve agricultural practices, and break the cycle of poverty.

Educational Reform. In the 1990s, policymakers refined management standards, redefining building norms and specifying admission criteria like age and health. Private firms were encouraged to support high-quality preschools, but only financially stable areas could afford large-scale systems. Until 1994, preschools relied on local government funding. Fiscal decentralization in 1994 shifted more expenses to local governments, undermining the existing preschool system and leading to widespread restructuring. With reduced national funding, many localities lacked funds for preschools, resulting in a sharp decline in the number of preschools, teachers, and stagnant enrollment rates by 1995 (Zhang et al. 2011).

This comprehensive strategy recognized the interconnectedness of economic development, infrastructure improvement, and social welfare in rural areas. While challenges persisted, such as uneven implementation and regional disparities, the overall effectiveness of these instruments was evident in the substantial reduction of rural poverty and the improvement of living conditions for millions of people during the 1990s.

National Western Development Strategy (late 1990s – 2000s)

The National Western Development Strategy implemented a multifaceted approach to address the economic and environmental challenges faced by the western regions of China. Investments in infrastructure, coupled with incentives for private investment, contributed to economic development and job creation. The integration of ecological conservation measures reflected a commitment to sustainable development. Concurrently, targeted poverty alleviation measures addressed social disparities and improved the quality of life for residents in the western regions.

While challenges persisted, such as environmental degradation and the need for sustained investments, the strategy marked a concerted effort to narrow the development gap between eastern and western regions. It aimed to create a more balanced and sustainable economic landscape, fostering inclusive growth and addressing specific challenges unique to the western provinces of China during the late 1990s and 2000s.

Further on the development of the western regions is enriched with new targets. From 2000 to 2016, the Chinese government invested 6.35 trillion RMB (\$914 billion) in 300 major projects, mostly infrastructure, education and talent retention, according to NCRC publications. The strategy aims to ensure sustainable development of the regions in western China, through state investment in infrastructure that connects the region with the southern and eastern parts of China (Peneva 2020: 35). But it didn't stop there. Land connections with the countries of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative, which subsequently became a strategy, directly affecting countries of Eastern Europe (Chankov 2020: 141) and integrating regional strategy with international and subsequently global strategy.

New Century Poverty Alleviation Plan (2001–2010): China launched a comprehensive poverty alleviation plan at the beginning of the 21st century, outlining strategies for rural development, education, healthcare, and social security. The plan aimed to reduce the poverty rate and improve living standards in both rural and urban areas. The New Century Poverty Alleviation Plan (2001–2010) represented a shift toward more targeted and nuanced strategies to combat poverty. By enhancing the precision of interventions, the plan sought to address the unique challenges faced by different impoverished areas. Social welfare programs aimed to improve the quality of life, while ecological migration initiatives recognized the interconnectedness of poverty and environmental issues.

Enhanced Targeting of Impoverished Areas: The plan emphasized a more precise targeting of impoverished areas, focusing on identifying and addressing the specific challenges faced by communities in poverty using the instruments of housing and infrastructure construction. Recognizing environmental challenges in certain impoverished areas, the plan included measures for ecological migration and resettlement to more sustainable locations.

1) Renovation of old and run-down homes in rural areas is an important government action to make sure people have basic necessities. Since 2013, around 25.68 million poor people from 7.9 million families got help to repair their old houses made of mud and straw. Support was also given to 10.75 million rural families facing financial difficulties. This included families getting financial aid,

people with serious financial problems being taken care of by the government at home, and families with disabled members who are struggling financially.

Improving the homes of rural poor people is part of a bigger plan to enhance the rural areas. This plan includes building roads, planting trees, providing clean drinking water, managing garbage, and treating sewage. Thanks to all these efforts, the living conditions in the Chinese countryside have gotten much better. When fixing homes in poor rural areas, the government tries to keep the local style and traditions as much as possible. They've also created cultural villages to help reduce poverty and increase income from tourism in those areas.

2) Construction of new houses and relocation. In the period from 2016 to 2020 China constructed 35,000 settlement communities and 2.66 million homes for 9.6 million relocated poor individuals. This effort successfully lifted them out of poverty, forming a strong basis for eradicating extreme poverty. (Zhu et al. 2021; Leng et al. 2021; Tang et al. 2022)

Educational Reform: Preschool changed a lot after 2005 when leaders wanted more little kids to go to school, and the government started giving money for it. In the early 2000s, less than 30% of kids in China went to preschool. Most were from cities, rich areas, or suburbs. But by 2015, a whopping 95% of kids were in preschool. Even in poor mountain areas, our research in southern Shaanxi found that over 85% of families sent their kids to preschool.

The plan comprised seven essential components aimed at improving education in rural areas. These include: 1) the establishment of rural boarding schools, 2) the introduction of the “two exempts and one subsidy” system to support economically disadvantaged students in the western region with excellent results on poverty reduction (He X. 2020: 3), 3) a commitment to the long-term modernization of rural primary and secondary schools, 4) a substantial strengthening of the teaching staff in western rural areas, 5) initiatives to deepen reforms in teaching and learning for enhanced education quality, 6) the expansion and reinforcement of direct educational assistance, and 7) the establishment of clear responsibilities for various government levels in the plan implementation.

Social Welfare Programs and Basic Services: The plan included the implementation of social welfare programs, with a focus on improving access to basic services such as education, healthcare, and housing in impoverished areas. Over the decade, the government changed the way it helped people in rural areas. They transformed five guarantees mechanism from a collective system funded locally, to a modern one funded by the central government. By the end of 2010, this support reached 5.34 million rural households with 5.563 million people, covering almost everyone eligible. In 2009, the government tested a *new social*

insurance plan for retirement in some rural areas. In this innovative rural resident social endowment insurance, the required funds come from individual contributions, collective grants, and government subsidies (MoA, State Council 2011: 1).

In 2003, the Chinese government initiated *the New Cooperative Medical Scheme* and the Scheme for Assistance to the Poor in Rural Areas, marking the beginning of significant healthcare reforms. In 2009, a healthcare reform, with an investment of 850 billion RMB over three years, aimed at providing universal health coverage and enhancing healthcare services for the country's growing population. However, challenges persisted along with the increase of the medical scheme coverage (Lei X. 2009: 1), requiring measures for enhancement of the scheme quality. The commitment continued with the launch of a poverty alleviation plan as part of the 13th Five-Year Plan in December 2016, setting forth precise, targeted, and differentiated measures to effectively alleviate poverty. Notably, the central government and provincial authorities spent over 100 billion RMB in 2016 alone on poverty reduction efforts, deploying extensive resources and personnel to combat poverty in impoverished villages.

Precise Targeted Poverty Alleviation (2013 onwards)

The Precise Targeted Poverty Alleviation initiative in China, implemented from 2013 onwards, employed a range of instruments to address poverty with a more data-driven and targeted approach. Here are some key instruments used during this period:

Big Data and Technology: The use of big data and technology played a crucial role in identifying impoverished areas and households (He J. et al 2020) (Sun X. 2018). Data analytics and technology tools were employed to assess poverty at a granular level, allowing for more precise targeting of interventions. Leveraging big data and technology improved the accuracy of poverty identification, enabling authorities to focus resources on the areas and individuals most in need. It enhanced efficiency in decision-making and resource allocation.

Rural Revitalization Strategies: The concept of rural revitalization was central to the targeted poverty alleviation efforts. It involved comprehensive strategies to revitalize rural areas, including infrastructure development, access to markets, and cultural preservation. The government successively abolished the animal husbandry tax, pig slaughtering tax, and tax on agricultural and forestry specialties. Then, it abolished the agriculture tax that had existed in China for over 2,600 years. The government issued subsidies directly to grain growers, subsidies for purchasing fine seeds and agricultural machinery and tools and general subsidies for purchasing agricultural supplies; gradually established and

improved the social security system for rural China, and pushed forward the construction of infrastructure related to drinking water, electricity, road and methane, along with the renovation of dilapidated rural housing (MoA, State Council 2011).

Social Security: The legal framework marked a major change in 2008 with the amendment of the Labor Contract Law and the subsequent Social Security Law in 2011, seeking to ensure worker rights, social security participation, and the provision of written contracts, especially for migrant workers. This was a basis for securing social insurance and wellbeing for inactive age of migrant workers and allow them to work longer and more into the industrial and service economic sectors, rather than taking care of disabled relatives at home alone.

These periods highlight China's dynamic and evolving approach to poverty alleviation, showcasing a transition from broader development strategies to more targeted and data-driven interventions in recent years. China's commitment to eradicating poverty continues to shape its policies, fostering inclusive economic growth and improving the well-being of its citizens.

Challenges

China faces multifaceted challenges in its efforts to address social welfare and support vulnerable populations. The unprecedented migration of 160 million rural individuals to urban areas, particularly within the last 15 years, underscores a demographic shift that, despite its scale, falls short of effectively mitigating the persistent labor shortages in cities. This challenge is compounded by policies treating migrants as temporary "guest workers", leading to shorter migration periods and complicating the integration of this substantial labor force into urban communities.

However, challenges persist in enforcing these regulations comprehensively across diverse industries and regions. The legal mandate for social security participation does not fully address the reluctance of local governments to transfer funds when migrants relocate, revealing a tension between regional budget considerations and the broader goal of equitable social security provision.

Moreover, the positive contributions made by firms and healthy migrants to local health insurance and pension funds are overshadowed by the hesitancy of most local governments to transfer these funds across regions. This reluctance highlights a broader challenge in achieving seamless and equitable social security coverage for all citizens, irrespective of their geographic mobility. The complexities inherent in balancing the needs of migrants, the legal framework, and regional fiscal considerations underscore the ongoing efforts required to create a more inclusive and adaptable social welfare system in China.

These challenges not only impact the effectiveness of social welfare programs but also emphasize the intricate interplay between legal frameworks, regional policies, and societal perceptions, necessitating continuous efforts to refine and address the evolving needs of China's diverse population.

Perspectives

China has embraced a new poverty line, aiming for a per capita income of 2.15 USD in the medium term and 6.8 USD in the long term. This aligns with the statistics and guidelines set by the World Bank in September 2022, establishing a 2.15 USD threshold for all countries worldwide. Previously, many East Asian countries, including China, used lower thresholds in their poverty alleviation policies. The implementation of crucial structural reforms remains crucial to strengthening recovery and achieving China's long-term goals of environmentally sustainable, resilient, and inclusive growth.

The World Bank's analysis reveals that the net benefits (received public services and transfers minus paid taxes) provided by China's fiscal system are progressive, offering greater value to lower-income households (World Bank 2020). Publicly provided educational and health services constitute a significant portion of the support extended by the government to low-income households. However, the overall impact of fiscal policy on inequality is partially offset by the burden of regressive indirect taxes such as the value-added tax (VAT) and other consumption taxes, disproportionately affecting poorer households. Compared to other countries and high-income nations, China relies more on VAT and collects less personal income tax, which tends to be progressive.

Therefore, there is a potential for fiscal policy to reduce inequalities further. This can be achieved by increasing the share of fiscal revenues collected through progressive taxes like income and property taxes. Further improvements could focus on closing remaining gaps in access to high-quality public services, expanding the scope and level of social assistance, and ensuring that these benefits are transferable across provinces (World Bank 2020) (IMF 2017).

In conclusion, China's commitment to eradicating poverty extends beyond national boundaries, aligning with global standards and emphasizing sustainability and inclusivity. The prospects for the future hinge on a holistic approach that combines structural reforms, fiscal adjustments, global collaboration, and targeted policies to address specific challenges and ensure a more equitable and prosperous future for all citizens.

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