

Filling the Loopholes: Provided Rural Public Goods by the First Secretary

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Abstract: Under the background that the project system can not cover small and irregular rural public demands, and when village cadres do not have much ability and motivation to respond to these public demands, the first secretary plays a basic role in filling these loopholes in public goods provision. What researchers have not systematically examined is the delivery of public goods provision by the first secretary to the poor village. Drawing on in-depth qualitative interviews with first secretaries of six poor villages, we find that they provided a range of public goods, including four main categories: production; life; culture and sports; education. We also find that three main factors influencing first secretaries to providing public goods: managerial encouragement; joint liability; political commitment. The findings contribute to the first secretary and rural public goods provision literature.

1. Introduction

Among China's most distinctive governance tradition is the frequent reliance on "work teams" to accomplish important tasks^[1]. This governance tradition has continued from land reform to precision poverty alleviation. Since 2013, the CPC has sent a large number of "work teams" to poor villages to implement poverty alleviation policies, including more than 3 million first secretaries and cadres stationing in village. As the leader of "work teams", first Secretaries are usually considered to promote the fair implementation of poverty alleviation policies, strengthen the governance capacity of villages, provide peasants' political identity with the CPC and help poor villages develop their economy^[2,3].

Researchers usually only focus on the role of first secretaries in the field of precision poverty alleviation, but relatively ignore their possible functions in other areas of village governance as the external support force. From 2020 to 2021, the research team went to N Township in western China and investigated in six poor villages. We found an interesting phenomenon, that is, although there are no formal duties and indicators evaluating their work performance to guide, first secretaries of these villages take the initiative to provide peasants with a series of public goods. This phenomenon has not been systematically discussed and examined in the previous literature. Therefore, we attempt to combine the first Secretary's assistance of stationing in village with the dilemma of rural public goods provision to conduct an exploratory case study, hoping to reveal the role of the first secretary and the dynamic mechanism in providing public goods.

2. The Dilemma of Rural Public Goods Provision

The abolition of agricultural taxes (AAT) (2005-2006) has been successful in lightening the burden on peasants and alleviating the tense relationship between cadres and peasants. But the unintended consequence is that it weakens the financial capacity and governance ability of those villages with no collective economy and few transfer payments, and also reduces the enthusiasm of village cadres to provide public goods for peasants, making rural public goods provision in a difficult position.

2.1. Lack of Village Cadres' Governance Ability

The supply of rural public goods usually faces two challenges: the first is to find access to resources, and the second is to overcome the problem of collective action^[4]. Prior to the AAT, village's finances rely to some extent on the agricultural surtaxes collected from peasants. Meanwhile, the system of compulsory labour and accumulated labour for rural public works and public utilities was the key administrative resource for village cadres to mobilize peasants^[5]. Village cadres can make effective use of the two kinds of resources to overcome the two challenges in the supply of public goods. After the AAT, the central government also abolish the agricultural surtaxes, the power of village cadres to impose fees on peasants, and the system of compulsory labour and accumulated labour^[6]. These changes have hollowed out village cadres' financial and administrative resources, so that they have lost the economic leverage and coercive ability to mobilize peasants contributing money and manpower to public goods.

To solve the problem of raising finance and manpower during establishment of rural public goods, the central government has formulated the system of "One Project, One Discussion", that is, if a village wants to set up rural public works and public utilities, it must be deliberated and decided by the meeting of villagers' representatives. Because village cadres have lost the economic lever and coercive ability to mobilize peasants, it is very difficult to raise finance and manpower, and it is no longer possible for village cadres in most rural areas to collect any fees from peasants^[6]. Meanwhile, another way is to bypass township government and village cadres and directly enter villages in the form of the project system to provide public goods. However, the project resources are controlled by the county government and its subordinate departments, which are often far away from the villages. Because the demands for public goods in the village is usually vague and irregular, the biggest disadvantage of this mode is that it can not flexibly and sensitively identify and meet the demands for public goods in the villages^[7].

2.2. Lack of Village Cadres' Public Accountability

AAT has not only hollowed out village cadres' finance and power, but also changed their functions and public accountability^[5]. After the AAT, relying on the measures of "salaries-from-above" that village cadres' salaries directly from county-level fiscal accounts funded and "village accounts managed by the township", the township government has strengthened the administrative control and fiscal oversight over the village cadres, driving them to work around the agendas of the township government^[8]. In mid-western rural China, these controls reinforce the dependence of village cadres on the township government, whose main function is not to meet the public needs of peasants, but to prioritize tasks assigned by the township government. Many studies have found that village cadres show the passive and perfunctory mentality and behavior, except to complete the tasks assigned by the township government, they do not actively intervene in the village public affair^[6].

AAT has also greatly reduced village cadres' formal public accountability to provide public goods in their villages. Prior to the AAT, because village cadres rely on peasants to cooperate with them in collecting taxes and fees, so they must respond to peasants' demands for public goods in exchange for peasants' cooperation. After the AAT, village cadres' dependence on peasants is greatly reduced, and there are few things required to cooperate with peasants, so they no longer have strong motivation to respond to the peasants' demands, and there is no need to enhance the collective interests to obtain the peasants' obedience^[6,9].

3. Context: the First Secretary from the Superior Department and the Leak of Rural Public Goods Provision

3.1. The First Secretary from the Superior Department

N township is one of the three poor townships in Z county, including 6 poor villages and 2303 poor households. Since 2015, first secretaries from provincial and municipal departments have entered six poor villages to help poor households get rid of poverty and village development. The

research team went to N township from 2020 to 2021 to investigate in six poor villages. From August to September 2020, we went to G Village and D Village. From April to May 2021, we went to G Village, D Village, X Village, C Village, M Village and B Village. We not only conducted in-depth interviews with six first secretaries, but also interviewed village cadres, township officials and some poor households.

Six poor villages are very similar in terms of economic development level, natural conditions, social and cultural conditions, poor population and the incidence of poverty. Meanwhile, under the leadership of the same township government, village cadres of six poor villages are faced with the same task environment, management system and allocation of financial resources. Six first secretaries' information is as follows: first secretary of G village is from provincial department of commerce; first secretary of D village is from municipal ethnic and religious committee; first secretary of X village is from municipal agricultural school; first secretary of C village is from provincial council for the promotion of international trade; first secretary of M village is from provincial department of commerce; first secretary of B village is from municipal united front work department.

Because precision poverty alleviation is the comprehensive and complex task, first secretaries almost have to participate in all the work of six poor villages. First secretaries are required to live, eat and work alongside village cadres and peasants, and stay in the village for no less than 200 days a year. In order to precise identification and assistance for poor households, first secretaries must interact frequently with poor households and understand their needs. In fact, this creates conditions and opportunities for the first secretary to understand and improve rural public goods provision.

3.2. Leak of Rural Public Goods Provision

Since 2014, the public goods provision of six poor villages has undergone earth-shaking changes, and the state has invested many poverty alleviation projects to build and improve village's road facilities, water facilities, power facilities, cultural activity rooms and village primary schools. These improved public infrastructure have two common characteristics: County government and its subordinate departments have the decision-making power over the supply of these public goods. These public goods are provided because government officials face assessment pressure from higher-level governments, not to respond to peasants' demands. In this process, the peasants are only the passive receiver. Meanwhile, the supply of these public goods has the characteristics of scale, standardization and clarity, which can be easily identified by the national project system.

What is more noteworthy is that there is another kind of demand for public goods in rural China. This kind of public goods is closely related to peasants' life, and it is often small, irregular and fuzzy, so it is difficult to be accurately identified and respond quickly by the national project system. For example, the serial road between households in the village belongs to this kind of public goods. According to the relevant laws of villagers' autonomy, village cadres should be responsible for the supply of such public goods, because they are close to peasants and can respond to these needs flexibly. However, due to the following reasons, village cadres ignore the supply of this kind of public goods, so there are many leaks of rural public goods provision.

The first reason is the lack of village cadres' governance ability. the village-level financial funds that village cadres can control independently are scarce. From 2020 to 2021, the average collective economic income of the six poor villages is 63900 yuan, the highest is 102700 yuan in M village and the lowest is 50300 yuan in D village. The funds for maintaining daily office operation each year mainly come from 30000 yuan of funds for party building work. Meanwhile, the authority of village cadres to mobilize peasants to participate in public goods provision has declined. The supply of many small public goods in the village only needs village cadres to bear the relevant cost of building materials, and then organize peasants to work. However, village cadres in six poor villages have almost lost the ability to mobilize peasants.

The second reason is that village cadres undertake multiple tasks from N township governments. In order to make village cadres cooperate to complete special tasks, the township government will allocate a certain amount of work funds, but this kind of work funds change greatly. It often

happens that there are only tasks but no work funds, or the work funds can not fully cope with the tasks. The collective economic income of the villages is used as a “spare fund” to deal with the tasks of their superiors, rather than as funds to respond to public demands. Meanwhile, from the perspective of village cadres, because some tasks need the cooperation of farmers, such as the planting of flue-cured tobacco and oriental tobacco. If village cadres take the initiative to solve the needs of peasants’ public goods in advance, then when faced with tasks, they will have no bargaining chips to exchange with peasants.

4. Improving Rural Public Goods Provision by the First Secretary: A Case from N Township

According to the research questions, the first part is to introduce the categories of public goods provided to peasants by six first secretaries between 2019 and 2021. The second part is to explain and reveal several factors affecting the public goods provision by the first secretary.

4.1. Public Goods Provided by the First Secretary

Based on the collation and analysis of interview data and other relevant second-hand data, the public goods provided by the first secretaries of the six poor villages are divided into four main categories: production, life, culture and sports, and education. It should be noted that these four categories are classified according to the functions of public goods, not according to specific physical objects. For example, the roads include not only the serial road between households to improve living conditions, but also ordinary roads to improve the travel of primary school students. Below, we describe each category of public goods in turn.

The public goods of improving production conditions. In six poor villages, four first secretaries reported that they had provided such public goods to peasants. First secretaries of G Village, C Village and B Village invested 1 million yuan, 1.1 million yuan and 0.95 million yuan respectively to build three professional places for peasants to stir-fry tea and improve their tea production conditions. In addition, first secretary of D Village invested 50000 yuan to help peasants who plant oriental tobacco repair 2 kilometers irrigation canals and set up pipelines. Similarly, first secretary of C village also raised 40000 yuan to repair and dredge 3 kilometers irrigation canals for the development of oriental tobacco.

The public goods of improving living conditions. Five first secretaries reported that they had provided such public goods. First secretary of M Village invested 50000 yuan to equip each villager group with trash cans and built garbage pools, and at the same time invested 100000 yuan to help peasants in two villager groups complete the construction of serial roads between households and family roads. First secretary of D Village raised 500000 yuan to help four villager groups build serial roads between households and family roads, and installed solar street lights. First Secretary of G Village raised 300000 yuan from the provincial water conservancy bureau to help a villager group improve drinking water facilities, so as to solve the problem of drinking water and production for 35 households. First secretary of B village invested 20000 yuan to help four villager groups improve the slippery cement road and bought drainage pipes for them. First secretary of X Village invested 6000 yuan to build two garbage pools for two villager groups.

The public goods of enriching cultural and sports activities. Four first secretaries reported that they had provided such public goods. First secretary of X Village raised 24000 yuan to build a cement road entering the activity room for a villager group, 9000 yuan to equip six villager groups with six sets of audio equipment for square dancing, and 30000 yuan to build three gyro fields for three villager groups. First secretary of G Village raised 40000 yuan to improve the hardware facilities of four villagers’ activity rooms, and 10000 yuan to help a villager group build a gyro field. Similarly, first secretary of D Village also raised 9000 yuan to help a villager group build a gyro farm. Moreover, first Secretary of M Village raised 100000 yuan to help a villager group repair the courtyard walls and toilets in the villagers’ activity room, thus improving the conditions for villagers to carry out cultural and sports activities.

The public goods of improving teaching conditions. Three first secretaries reported that they had provided such public goods. First secretary of G Village invested 7000 yuan to help the village

primary school repair a 100m access road and donated a set of drinking water purification equipment. Meanwhile, first secretary of C village also invested 40000 yuan to help the village primary school that is the boarding school upgrade and renovate the washroom and bathroom. In addition, as the kindergarten class in D Village is merged with the village primary school, but the desks and chairs for primary school students are not suitable for younger children in kindergarten class, and there is a hidden danger of falling when they use these unsuitable desks and chairs. First secretary donated 10000 yuan worth of desks and chairs suitable for kindergarten class teaching, as well as some other teaching equipment.

4.2. Factors Influencing the First Secretary to Provide Public Goods

Managerial encouragement. In the formal duties of the first secretary, serving peasants is one of the most important contents. First secretaries are required to strive to do practical and good things for peasants and to help them solve practical difficulties in production and life. In fact, the formal duties of the first secretary do not explicitly require them to provide public goods to peasants, and the number of public goods provided is not used as an indicator to evaluate their work performance. However, providing public goods is encouraged by the township government and organization department of county party committee, and can play the role of “extra points” in the annual performance appraisal of the first secretary. First secretaries who are committed to providing public goods are more likely to get “excellent” grade, which is helpful for their future political promotion.

Joint liability. Although first secretaries are not explicitly required to provide public goods, their original departments have the clear fixed-point poverty alleviation relationship with these poor villages, which means that they are joint liability for poverty alleviation and development of poor villages. The system of fixed-point poverty alleviation stipulates that first secretaries’ original departments, that is, party and government offices, enterprises and institutions, should provide a certain amount of financial resources to poor villages with fixed-point assistance every year, which is an important part of the annual performance appraisal of these departments. In other words, the fixed-point poverty alleviation relationship and joint and several liability between the original departments and poor villages have established the stable resource channel for first secretaries to provide public goods. This means that when first secretaries collect the demands for public goods, it is easier to obtain financial resources from their original departments to provide public goods flexibly.

Political commitment. In addition to managerial encouragement and joint liability, the political commitment of the first secretary provides an important incentive. First secretaries of six poor villages regard providing public goods as part of the political mission entrusted to them by the CPC, and have a sense of mission and honor for the supply of public goods. Even when the financial funds invested by their original departments are insufficient, they have a strong incentive to use and expand their interpersonal networks, and mobilize government departments, enterprises and non-governmental organizations to support the supply of public goods in poor villages. For example, the desks and chairs provided by first secretary of D village, and 3 kilometers irrigation canals that first secretary of C village helped repair and dredge, all stem from their initiative to contact caring enterprises to raise funds.

5. Conclusion

According to the qualitative research results of first secretaries of six poor villages, the current research shows that providing public goods is a major feature of the first secretary’s assistance in the village. Although six first secretaries come from different departments, they all report providing a range of public goods, including four main categories: production, life, culture and sports, and education. The research also find that there are three main factors affecting the first Secretary to providing public goods: managerial encouragement, joint liability and political commitment.

The research attempts to combine the first Secretary’s assistance of stationing in village with the dilemma of rural public goods provision. In addition to being the executor of poverty alleviation policies, the current research shows the first secretary also assumed the function of rural public

goods provision. Meanwhile, our analysis makes a contribution to the literature, providing evidence that under the background that the project system can not cover small and irregular rural public demands, and when village cadres do not have much ability and motivation to respond to these public demands, the first secretary plays a basic role in filling these loopholes in public goods provision.

The research also gives three possible explanations for the first secretary's behavior of providing public goods. The behavior of first secretary to provide public goods is embedded in the specific management system, so managerial encouragement and joint liability generated by the fixed-point assistance system becomes the promoter of the first secretary to provide public goods. In addition, the ideology and values of the CPC have penetrated into the public goods provision, and the first Secretary is believed to be responsible for peasants' difficulties in production and life, and such a political commitment makes them think that providing public goods is justified.

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