

Research on the Work-for-Relief Policy within the Scope of Comprehensive Rural Revitalization: Quantitative Analysis of Policy Texts Based on 71 Policy Documents

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Abstract: Work-for-relief plays a unique role in China's journey toward modernization. From the perspectives of policy tools and interest analysis, this paper uses quantitative analysis of policy texts and integrates grounded theory to build a policy expression analysis model to discuss the current work-for-relief policy system. The study found that China's use of the work-for-relief policy is unbalanced, and it is necessary to enhance the involvement of non-governmental sectors, as well as to fully consider the policy's target groups and the social issues that need addressing.

Keywords: Work-for-relief; Policy analysis; Policy tools

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1. Introduction

With the accelerated implementation of the comprehensive rural revitalization strategy, key issues such as rural economic development, farmers' income improvement, and rural living environment improvement have gradually become the focus of public policy discussions. In this context, as an important way of rural poverty alleviation and comprehensive development, the work-for-relief policy is increasingly favored by governments at all levels to alleviate rural poverty by providing employment opportunities, promoting industrial development, and improving farmers' skills.

The nationwide application of work-for-relief has yielded notable success. For example, the Sichuan government improved this system and promoted a self-built model for villagers ^[1]; Guangxi advanced it in forestry, creating effective models ^[2]; Anhui integrated it into small reservoir management to boost local employment and income ^[3]; Xinjiang focused on labor compensation through this mechanism ^[4]; and Guangyuan, Sichuan, developed the "1234567" framework ^[5]; The Guangshan County Government in Henan has established a work-for-relief linkage to support poverty eradication ^[6]; Xunyang District in Hubei has used

work-for-relief to increase local earnings ^[7]; and Cancong Village in Sichuan has driven this initiative at the grassroots level ^[8]. As a key part of China’s poverty policy, work-for-relief aids disaster recovery and mitigates urban-rural disparities. It prevents poverty relapse among low-income groups and injects vitality into rural revitalization ^[9].

Therefore, clarifying the unique features and logical expression of China’s recent work-for-relief policy is essential for enhancing and safeguarding the system. Research on this policy by Chinese scholars can be divided into three phases: an initial phase from 1949 to 1983 with scattered topics; a developmental phase from 1984 to 2000 focusing on poverty alleviation; and a consolidation phase post-2000 with more systematic and detailed research ^[10]. This paper analyzes policies issued from 2020 to 2024 using quantitative text analysis and grounded theory to assess the current policy system’s effectiveness, offering valuable references for the government to create scientifically sound policies that support the goal of shared prosperity ^[11].

2. Research design

2.1. Construction of a three-dimensional framework of policy analysis

In the “National Measures for the Administration of Work-for-Relief” issued by the National Development and Reform Commission in 2023, work-for-relief is defined as a government initiative where beneficiaries earn wages by participating in infrastructure projects, replacing direct aid ^[12]. This study aims to thoroughly examine the policy’s development and current status during the 14th Five-Year Plan, offering insights from governance perspectives. Grounded in grounded theory and analyzing policy documents post-2020, the research constructs a theoretical model using policy tools, subjects, and objects, complemented by guiding principles and systematic mechanisms, as seen in **Figure 1**.

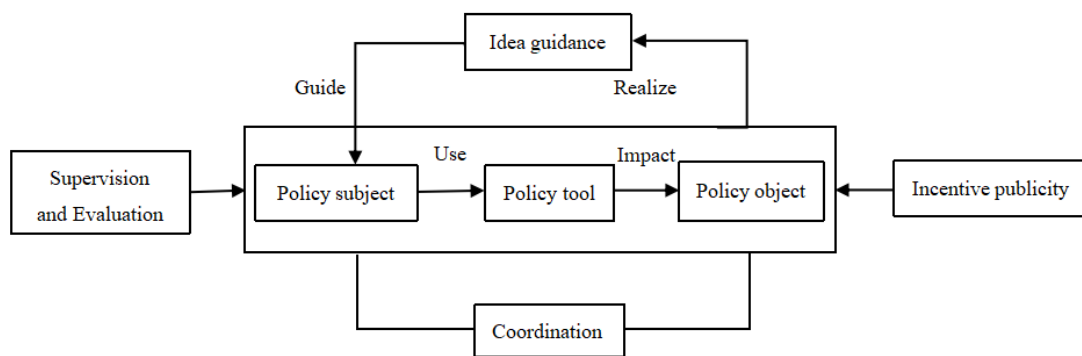


Figure 1. “Subject-tool-object” three-dimensional comprehensive analysis model

Compared with the traditional three-dimensional analysis framework, the policy expression model constructed in this study can address the limitations of the traditional model in policy governance research by neglecting the values and ideological guidance behind policy formulation. At the same time, it further highlights the integration of interactions among policy actors and beneficiaries, and the interplay among various policy tools, actors, and beneficiaries. This approach thereby offers a fresh analytical lens for work-for-relief policies, thoroughly capturing the dynamics and impact of the policy throughout its various phases, aiming to uncover novel paradigms in policy research.

Specifically, the policy subject dimension focuses on those directly involved in and executing the policy, which is vital for achieving the desired policy results ^[13]. The policy object dimension looks at the intended beneficiaries and societal issues addressed by the policy. Due to complex external and psychological factors,

clearly defining the policy object can be challenging for policymakers^[14]. From an interest analysis viewpoint, human behavior within the policy object can influence outcomes. Therefore, when studying work-for-relief policies, focusing on the target group encompasses the analytical scope of the policy object dimension, helping to track its changes and classifications^[15,16].

After reviewing relevant policy documents, this study divides policy actors into government bodies such as the Development and Reform Commission and non-governmental entities like work-for-relief project owners and contractors. The policy recipients include the core target audience of the participating populace. In building an integrated policy analysis framework, system mechanisms, and guiding principles are two key elements. System mechanisms are crucial for policy implementation, including coordination, supervision, and incentive mechanisms, each ensuring policy effectiveness, orderly processes, and goal attainment. Guiding principles provide the policy's direction and rationale, defining its core objectives and scope, and directing its formulation and execution.

2.2. Study sample selection

Under the background of the transition from poverty alleviation to rural revitalization, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council have put forward new requirements and made new arrangements for the work-for-relief work under the new situation since the 14th Five-Year Plan period, and issued a series of relevant policy documents, which provided a rich sample for this study. Therefore, in the process of text collection, this paper focuses on the policy text on work-for-relief from 2020 to March 2024. By using the legal resource data platform of “Peking University Magic Weapon” and the websites of governments at all levels, and searching with the keyword “work-for-relief,” a total of 164 policy texts since 2020 were obtained as of March 2024. To ensure the availability of the sample, clear screening criteria were developed: First, the issuing authority is directly under the State Council; Second, the policy type is mainly methods, notices, opinions, etc.; Third, the invalid file is not selected. After two screenings, 71 valid policy samples were finally sorted out, and the sorted policy texts were imported into Nvivo 11.0 software and manually coded sentence by sentence.

2.3. Reliability and validity test

To ensure the precision and dependability of the coding process, our study implemented a method involving simultaneous coding by multiple coders. Two coders were assigned to handle the policy tool dimension, while another two tackled the coding for other dimensions. Any discrepancies in coding results were collectively discussed and analyzed. After two iterations of comparing codes, we achieved a kappa coefficient of 0.935 for the policy tool dimension and 0.902 for the remaining dimensions. With an average Kappa coefficient exceeding 0.918, and considering that a Kappa coefficient above 0.81 indicates optimal concordance^[17], this study demonstrates substantial robustness and trustworthiness.

3. Quantitative analysis of policy texts

3.1. Dimension analysis of policy tools

Policy tools are the means for policy subjects to achieve policy objectives. To deeply understand the implementation mechanism and effect of the work-for-relief policy, this study draws on Rothwell and Zegveld's classification of policy tools and divides policy tools into supply-type policy tools, demand-type policy tools, and environmental-type policy tools^[18].

In the definition of this study, supply policy tools refer to a series of measures that policy subjects directly promote the development of work-for-relief through the investment of funds, coordinated leadership, talents,

technology, and other resources. Demand-oriented policy tools refer to a series of measures taken by policy subjects to stimulate the demand for work-for-relief projects by increasing public investment in work-for-relief, providing skills training for participating people, and promoting cooperation among social forces. Environmental policy tools are a series of measures for policy subjects to create a good external environment for the promotion and implementation of work-for-relief through system construction, promotion and guidance, supervision and regulation, incentive measures, and other means. The specific classification and definition of the policy tools of work-for-relief are shown in **Figure 2**.

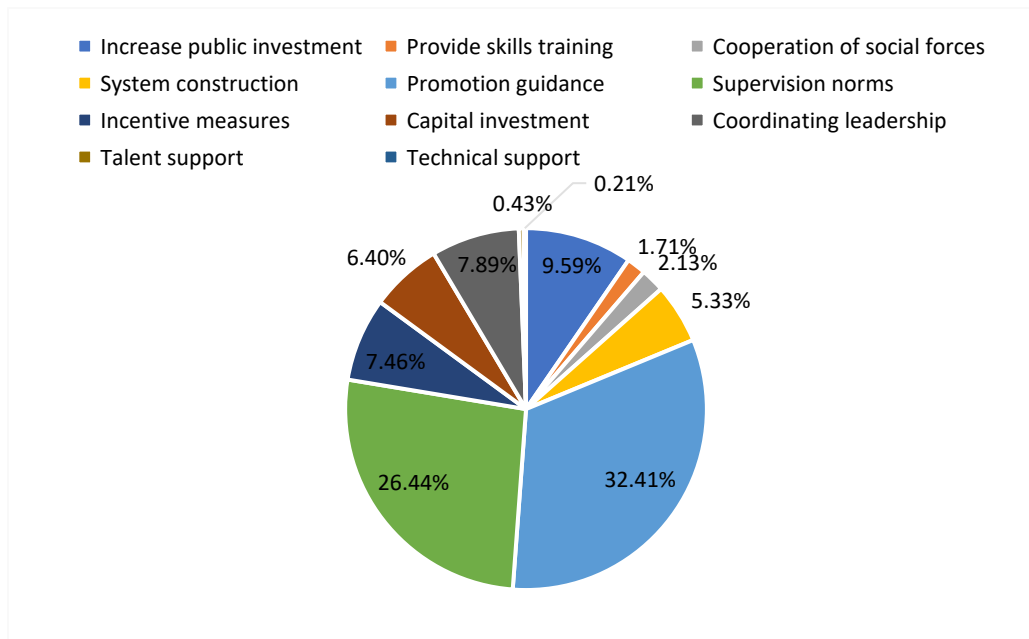


Figure 2. The specific classification and proportion of policy tools for work-for-relief

By analyzing the work-for-relief policy documents from 2020 to 2024 and considering the dimensions of policy tools, we identified that environmental support policy tools accounted for 70.77%, this is notably higher than the proportion of supply policy tools at 14.92% and demand policy tools at 14.31%. This indicates that there's an expansion in environmental policy tools, indicating that there is significant potential for enhancing supply-based and demand-based policy tools. The government has fostered a conducive environment in terms of top-level design, with the relevant policies having a strong impact, which indirectly promotes the development of work-for-relief. Nonetheless, it is evident that the contribution of supply-based and demand-based policy tools to advancing work-for-relief is limited, reflecting a clear imbalance in the types of policy tools utilized by the government for work-for-relief.

3.2. Multidimensional interaction analysis

3.2.1. Policy tool-policy subject dimension analysis

Examining the interaction between policy entities and tools reveals a pattern where government departments are fully involved, contrasted by partial participation from social forces. Specifically, every detailed action within the three major policy tools studied shows government involvement, while social forces mainly contribute to the supervision and promotion of environmental support tools. This contribution often stems from their expertise and flexibility in certain sectors. Non-governmental organizations, community organizations, and private companies might be more active in advocacy, promotion, and education but face limitations in other policy implementation aspects due to resource or authority restrictions.

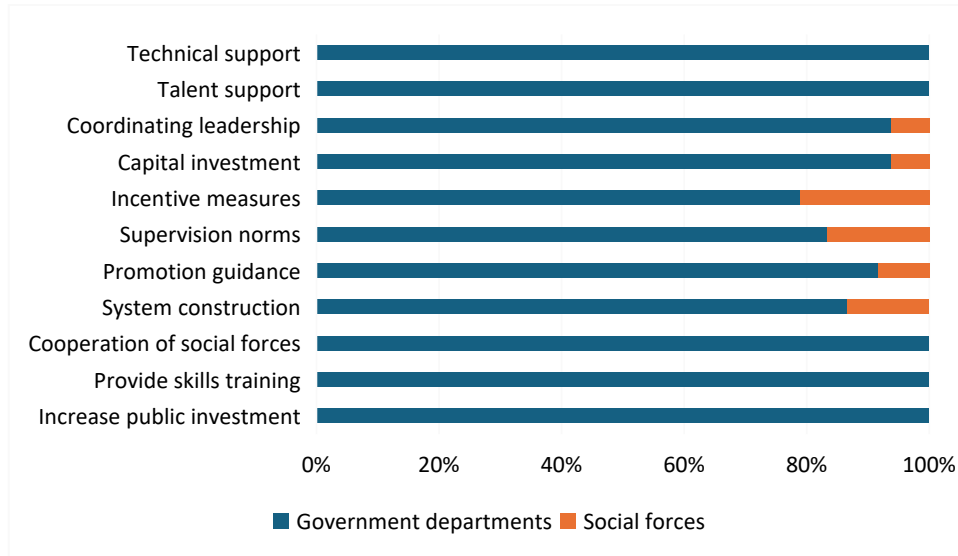


Figure 3. Analysis of policy tool-policy subject dimension

3.2.2. Analysis of policy tool-policy object dimension

Analyzing the interaction between policy tools and their targets clearly identifies the beneficiaries and target demographics of these tools, helping to define the social issues addressed by work-for-relief policies. The imbalance in tool use is evident, with a concentration on environmental tools. The emerging pattern places ‘participants’ at the core, as they are the most frequently and diversely targeted group, particularly in terms of public investment and guidance. This indicates that they are the main target in work-for-relief initiatives. Government departments are predominantly associated with system building, guidance, regulation, and coordination, often acting as key disseminators at both middle and grassroots levels.

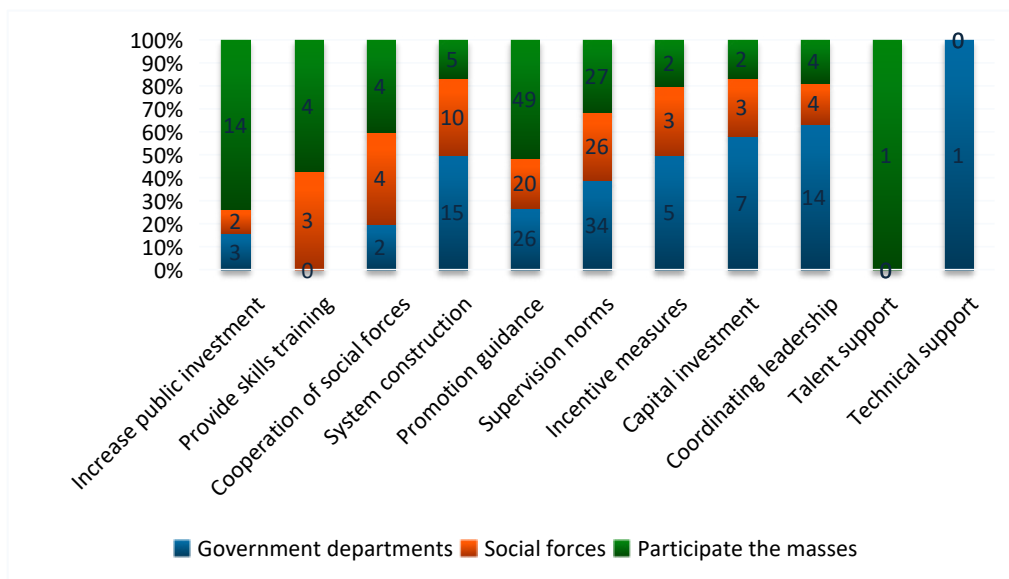


Figure 4. Policy tool-policy object dimension analysis

3.2.3. Analysis of the dimension of issuing authority-policy tool

The policy issuer serves as both the creator and strategist, holding a central role in the policy’s effectiveness. Analyzing their interaction helps manage tool preferences on a broader scale. Research reveals an increasing

disparity in tool use, with environmental tools rising from 59.2% in State Council documents to 78.67% in ministries. This may be due to the National People’s Congress focusing solely on these tools, causing a bias in communication and application. A policy imitation effect is also evident in public policy dissemination, impacting the overall outcome ^[19].

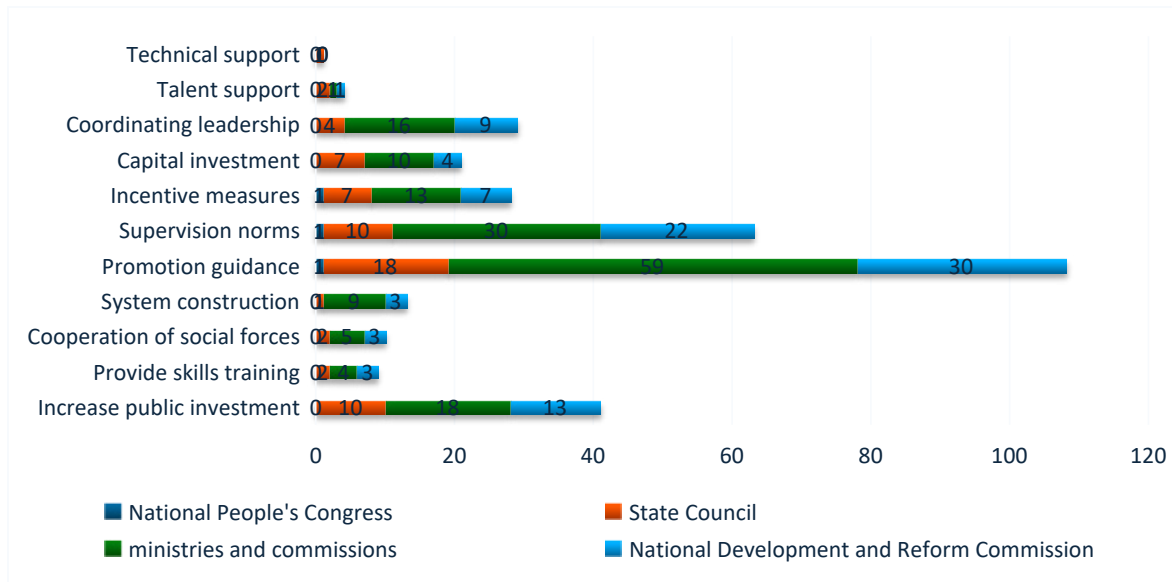


Figure 5. Issuing authority-policy tool dimension analysis diagram

4. Conclusion

Starting from the 1980s, the relief-type assistance prioritized water conservancy, transportation, and production facilities, evolving to the targeted poverty alleviation phase that emphasized the drinking water safety project. The work-for-relief approach to poverty alleviation has been a consistent thread throughout China’s 70 years of poverty reduction efforts, establishing a relatively mature model and system ^[20]. Utilizing the comprehensive “subject-tool-object” three-dimensional analytical framework, this paper systematically reviews China’s work-for-relief policy documentation since 2020.

Firstly, the current government’s utilization of policy tools is unbalanced and disproportionate. Environmentally supportive policy tools account for over 60% of usage, hindering sustained and effective factor inputs, and revealing a bias in the selection and application of tools ^[21]. In choosing policy tools, it is essential to consider not only the tools themselves but also their operational environment ^[22]. This imbalance may stem from preferences during policy design or over-reliance on the effectiveness of certain tools.

Secondly, policy implementation features comprehensive government involvement with selective social participation. Governments ensure the work-for-relief policy is systematic and coherent by covering all policy tools. Social forces are partially involved, focusing on oversight and advocacy, showcasing their expertise and flexibility. However, government projects prioritize efficiency, sometimes excluding lower-quality laborers and delaying benefits for the poorest. Market mechanisms should be introduced to develop the industrial chain ^[23,24]. Therefore, increasing social participation in work-for-relief governance is essential.

Thirdly, within the framework where policy tools impact policy subjects, there’s a clear focus on “mass participation.” As the key beneficiaries of the work-for-relief policy, especially in areas like public investment and guidance, these groups experience significant benefits and broad involvement. This aligns with the policy’s intent to address their employment issues through work-for-relief schemes. Yet, the scope of these schemes

remains limited compared to other job-creation measures like entrepreneurship support and vocational training [25]. To enhance the effectiveness of work-for-relief policies, it's crucial to widen their reach, considering both the target populations and societal challenges. A multi-tiered approach is needed to refine policy targeting [26,27].

Lastly, there's a growing emphasis on environmental support policy tools during policy reproduction, evident in documents from the State Council and related agencies [28]. This shift likely stems from laws introduced by the National People's Congress, leading to communication distortions and copycat mechanisms that impact policy outcomes.

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