

Original Research Article

Collective efficacy and village sustainable development: An empirical study based on village assistance cases by the China foundation for poverty alleviation

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Abstract: Promoting sustainable village development constitutes a critical theoretical and practical imperative for advancing China's rural revitalization and common prosperity strategies. Collective efficacy emerges as a pivotal determinant influencing sustainable village development, with the collective institutionalization mechanism serving as the core operational framework to achieve such efficacy and drive sustainable progress. The collective governance structure of villages stands as a crucial variable affecting the implementation of this institutionalization mechanism. Our analysis reveals a structural paradox in institutional operations: During the initial and growth phases of collective economic development, when the governance structure manifests complex operational features characterized by separate Party, government, and economic organizations with decentralized checks and balances, the implementation of collective institutionalization mechanisms encounters significant impediments. Under such circumstances, the realization of collective efficacy becomes unattainable, thereby undermining the prospects of sustainable village development. Conversely, when the governance structure demonstrates integrated and streamlined operational characteristics featuring coordinated interactions among distinct yet synergistic Party, government, and economic entities, the collective institutionalization mechanism can be effectively implemented. This operational paradigm facilitates the achievement of collective efficacy and propels sustainable village development. This structural analysis underscores the critical importance of optimizing village governance models to align with developmental phases, particularly through establishing collaborative mechanisms that maintain organizational distinctions while enhancing functional integration among key governance actors.

Keywords: collective efficacy; collective institutionalization mechanism; collective governance structure; sustainable village development

1. Research question and theoretical hypothesis

As a spatial-temporal entity that has stably existed throughout China's vast rural areas and historical development, the village not only carries forward millennia of agrarian civilization but also plays a significant social role ^[1]. Since the reform and opening up, rural China has developed two types of villages: "decentralized villages" and "collectivized villages". Decentralized villages refer to those where family-based individual farming is the primary organizational form, the collective economy is weak, collective economic organizations have either not been established or are not substantially operational, village resources are fragmented, individual private economy dominates, and villagers are relatively decentralized. Collectivized villages refer to those that adhere to collective management as the leading force, based on the collective economy, with organization, cooperation, and collectivization as the operational forms, and gradually achieve common prosperity on a collectivized path through collective and organized efforts. Experience shows that in the new era of vigorously promoting rural revitalization and common prosperity, "collectivized villages" are increasing. However, overall, most villages in contemporary China remain "decentralized villages," with only a few such as Nanjie Village, Dazhai Village, and Jiajia Village being "collectivized villages." Both types of villages face challenges related to sustainable development ^[2]. This paper primarily examines the sustainable development issues of "decentralized villages."

Collective efficacy refers to the situation where a village's collective organizational system is well-established and capable of operating effectively. This entails the ability to manage internal village relations to maintain harmony and stability, integrate village resources to effectively connect with external market capital and government financial resources to promote economic development, and handle relations with higher-level Party committees and governments to secure favorable policy conditions for village development. A mechanism is a process that drives change; factors can only exert influence through mechanisms^[3]. The sustainable development of villages requires the driving force of a collective substantiation mechanism. The three factors—Collective efficacy, support from external forces, and the introduction of modern elements into the village—Can only influence sustainable village development by relying on a collective substantiation mechanism.

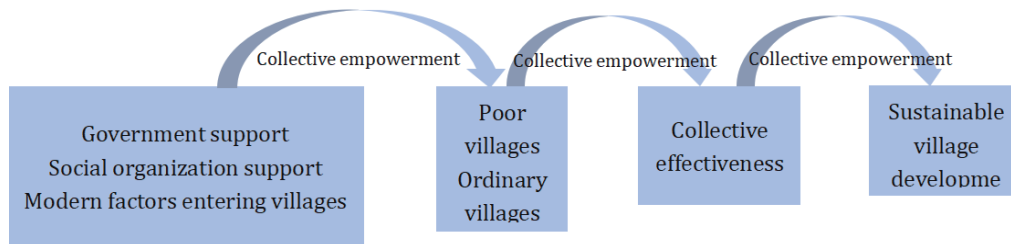


Figure 1. Schematic diagram of the mechanism and influencing factors of sustainable village development.

In the following sections, we will conduct a comparative analysis of two villages assisted by the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation . Minle Village in Mianzhu City, Sichuan Province, and Nanyu Village in Laishui County, Hebei Province. Employing a semi-negative case comparison method, we aim to discern the role of the collective substantiation mechanism in overcoming collective ineffectiveness, achieving collective efficacy, and promoting sustainable village development, thereby testing our academic hypothesis.

2. Research method and case selection justification

2.1. Research method

The semi-negative case comparison method builds upon the positive-negative case comparison method, and thus it is also a method for comparing cases with similar initial conditions but different outcomes. In the semi-negative case comparison method, a comparison between positive and negative cases remains essential. However, this method imposes stricter selection criteria for negative cases. Compared to traditional comparative methods, the semi-negative case comparison method places the integration of factors and mechanisms at the core of its argumentation. It focuses specifically on those negative cases that share similar mechanisms with positive cases, thereby enabling a more precise identification of the existence of a mechanism. Therefore, if the traditional positive-negative case comparison method tends to overlook mechanisms due to its emphasis on logical reasoning about the role of factors, the semi-negative case comparison method concentrates specifically on positive and negative cases where the same mechanism is present. In this method, a positive case refers to one in which a mechanism is fully realized, while a negative case refers to one in which, due to a particular factor, the mechanism is not fully realized.

Table 1. Sustainable village development of nanyu village and minle village under the semi-negative case comparative method.

Case (1: Positive Case; 2: Semi-Negative Case)	Investigated Variable (Village Collective Governance System)	Control Variables (Village-Related Circumstances)	Intermediate Mechanism (Collective Empowerment)	Outcome
1 Nanyu Village	+	+	+	Sustainable Development
2 Minle Village	-	+	+(Hindered)	Economic Project Bankruptcy

2.2. Case selection justification

According to the principles of the semi-negative case comparison method, qualified semi-negative cases require positive and negative cases with similar initial conditions, similar mechanisms, and differing outcomes. Minle Village and Nanyu Village, both assisted by the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation, meet these

requirements.

3. The process of collective substantiation in Minle village and Nanyu village: A comparative analysis

3.1. The process of collective substantiation in Minle village

Through investigation and analysis, the working team stationed in Minle Village by the Foundation recognized that if they directly distributed the 5 million yuan in raised funds to villagers at 10,000 yuan per household, the villagers would certainly be very pleased. However, this money would soon be spent, failing to develop viable industrial projects and making it difficult to achieve the goal of sustainable village development. Individual farming household projects could not achieve sufficient scale to compete effectively in the market. To implement industrial projects in rural areas, it was necessary to pool villagers' resources, transform the former decentralized development approach of individual households operating separately, and achieve scaled operations and shared development. Based on this understanding, the Foundation initiated the construction of a collective substantiation mechanism in Minle Village and began vigorously promoting actions for collective substantiation.

Following the failures of both the mushroom factory and rex rabbit breeding projects, Minle Village's collective substantiation mechanism subsequently ceased. The village reverted to maintaining its original condition of smallholder household farming operations and continued to rely on waiting and depending on government support and assistance from public welfare organizations for development. The prospect of resolving collective ineffectiveness in Minle Village appeared dim in the foreseeable future, and the village's sustainable development became increasingly uncertain.

3.2. The process of collective substantiation in Nanyu village

Nanyu Village was once an impoverished mountain village under the jurisdiction of Laishui County, Hebei Province. In 2015, under the leadership of Village Party Branch Secretary Duan Chunting, the two village committees (Party branch and villagers' committee) of Nanyu Village spent a year preparing and successfully applied for the Baimei Homestay Tourism Poverty Alleviation Project at the end of November 2015. This was a public welfare project jointly initiated by the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation and China Samsung, planning to invest 10 million yuan to promote sustainable development in a selected impoverished village in Hebei. At the end of February 2016, the Foundation dispatched a village-based work team, initiating the collective substantiation process in Nanyu Village.

3.3. Case summary

Both Nanyu Village and Minle Village were impoverished villages, sharing largely similar initial conditions for village development, government support, assistance from social welfare organizations, and the introduction of modern elements into the villages. Why, then, has Nanyu Village preliminarily achieved sustainable village development, while Minle Village faces dim prospects for sustainable development? We argue that this is primarily because Minle Village's collective substantiation mechanism encountered obstacles and was prematurely terminated, thereby failing to resolve the problem of collective ineffectiveness. In contrast, Nanyu Village's collective substantiation mechanism proceeded smoothly without hindrance, enabling the village to achieve collective efficacy and, consequently, preliminarily realize sustainable village development.

A comparative analysis of the collective substantiation processes in Minle Village and Nanyu Village reveals two social facts. First, during the initial and developmental stages of collective economic development, the implementation of a multi-actor complex operational collective governance system—Characterized by separate Party, government, and economic organizations with checks and balances through power division—Further reinforces collective ineffectiveness. This results in the lack of an effective platform and mechanism to receive support from external government and social welfare organizations, as well as the introduction of modern elements into the village. Ultimately, this leads to the termination of the collective substantiation process and renders sustainable village development elusive. Second, during the initial and developmental stages of collective economic development, the implementation of an integrated simplified operational system—Characterized by separate Party, government, and economic organizations with mutual promotion and linkage—Contributes to

strengthening village collective substantiation. This system enhances villagers' trust in the collective, increases their enthusiasm and initiative to participate in village development, reinforces the effectiveness of collective action, and achieves collective efficacy. Furthermore, it facilitates, through collective efficacy, the "mutual learning, complementarity, and interaction" between modern elements from outside the village—Such as capital, technology, talent, and management—And local resources within the village—Including natural, cultural, ecological, and human assets. This enables "multiple forces to achieve symbiosis, share, and win-win," ultimately generating "a powerful synergy for revitalizing rural industries" and realizing sustainable village development.

4. Research conclusion

This paper validates the academic hypothesis that "collective efficacy is a key factor in sustainable village development." The research demonstrates that the collective substantiation mechanism is the core mechanism for achieving collective efficacy and promoting sustainable village development. Sustainable village development requires the driving force of a collective substantiation mechanism.

The research findings of this paper suggest that in the process of promoting comprehensive rural revitalization and sustainable village development in China, it is necessary to "reclaim the collective" . This requires emphasizing the role and value of the collective, highlighting the key position of village collectives in rural revitalization, and dismantling "concepts that hinder the development of rural collectives and collective economic organizations." It also necessitates introspection those policies that neglect or ignore the collective, and optimizing relevant national policies around the overarching goal of making the "collective effective."

References

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