

Structural Empowerment and Project-Based Governance of Public Services Provision: A Case Study Based on a Chinese Community

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How to cite this paper: Huang, Q. R. (2026). Structural Empowerment and Project-Based Governance of Public Services Provision: A Case Study Based on a Chinese Community. *Open Journal of Political Science*, 16, 675-695.
<https://doi.org/10.4236/ojps.2026.164032>

Received: September 15, 2026

Accepted: October 20, 2026

Published: October 23, 2026

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Abstract

The project system is an important approach for the state to deliver public resources to the grassroots. However, the project-based supply of public services at the primary level often faces problems like adaptive policy implementation and resource detachment. In recent years, innovative practices of local government have provided valuable explorations to address these challenges. This paper analyzes how structural empowerment reshapes project-based governance at primary level from dimensions of institutions, resources, and actions, by examining the process of social service project governance in Community B. Research findings show that the construction of participatory decision-making mechanism embeds procedures of public opinion absorption and negotiation into the project initiation process. The establishment of an empowerment resource support system promotes the formation of resource networks, making resource mobilization effective. The affirmation of autonomous implementation provides the community with sufficient opportunities for self-action. These institutional arrangements have changed how power of decision-making, resource control and project implementation function in community public service project. It makes the community the hub of project-based governance, thereby improving the accuracy of public service supply, promoting the endogenous growth of community governance capabilities, and facilitating the development of order in community governance.

Keywords

Project System, Community Empowerment, Consultative Deliberation System, Grassroots Governance

1. The Dilemma of Precise Provision of Community Public Services

Providing public services to the society is an important function and capability of the government. For a long time, public services provision in urban and rural areas of China has been dominated by the state. The central and local governments have allocated financial resources to local areas continuously and massively to improve the situation of public services. It is mainly achieved by two means: one is the bureaucratic system, and the other is governance techniques. During the planned economy period, the government was the only entity to provide public services, and the bureaucratic system was the main way of delivering resources to the grass-roots society. Resources were distributed through the administrative organizational system to individuals from top to bottom. In cities, this was carried out by units (Dan Wei), while in rural areas, it was done through communes (Gong She). This way of public resource provision through bureaucratic organizations is known as “bureaucratic supply” (He, 2006). Since the reform and opening up, the demand for public services has significantly increased with the rapid development of the economy and society. However, the unit system and commune system collapsed successively, while the resources at the primary level were insufficient, resulting in the failure of public service provision to meet social needs. In this context, the distribution and delivery of public service resources have changed. Multiple forces, such as enterprises, social organizations, and residents, have been introduced into the process of service supply. The project system has gradually become the main governance technique for the state to deliver financial resources to the primary level.

The project system is a governance institution characterized by a top-down decision-making and resource allocation process. The higher-level government “contracts out” projects in order to motivate lower-level governments and other entities to participate in the public services provision. By setting up special funds and regulating the use of funds, public service provision at the primary level is incorporated into the scope of fiscal expenditure, reducing the burden on organizations and residents. However, it strengthens the top-down decision-making mechanism, resulting in insufficient participation of residents, making it difficult for the government to understand true preferences of residents accurately. Moreover, the implementation of projects is highly dependent on local governments and organizations, who have different goals and engage in interest conflicts, thus reducing the effectiveness of resource allocation (Gui, 2014). Therefore, in the practice of project-based governance, public service provision often falls into the “last mile” dilemmas of “suspension” and “mis-allocation”. These dilemmas reflect two major challenges faced by the state. That is how to absorb and integrate residents’ preferences systematically and accurately, and how to establish an efficient and precise connection between resources and demands to prevent resources from being retained and wasted. These problems cannot be solved simply by introducing multiple entities or adopting diversified supply paths.

However, in recent years, phenomena contrary to this understanding have emerged in some areas in China. Without changing the operational framework of the project system, local governments have still been able to avoid the aforementioned dilemmas and achieve public service provision precisely and effectively. This phenomenon, which deviates from existing theoretical explanations, constitutes the research question of this paper. That is how can local governments promote the delivery of public service resources to the grassroots precisely through the project system? Local government has gradually realized that merely allocating resources to townships, villages, and communities in the form of projects is insufficient to ensure the precise supply of public services. In the process of project contracting, governments strategically introduce certain institutional arrangements to reshape the structure of actors and their interaction, and to activate the subjectivity of grassroots organizations, which achieve the goals of preference understanding and resource mobilization. Specifically, local governments institutionalize the process of project-based governance to grant grassroots organizations greater participatory autonomy in decision-making, fund use, and project implementation while retaining their control power. This constrains their behavior and enhances their capacities for needs identification, resource allocation, and policy implementation, thus facilitating resource delivery and grassroots mobilization effectively. This innovative practice is called “structural empowerment” in this paper. It refers to reshaping the autonomous space of local communities and cultivating their capacity for self-governance through institutional norms or implant of governance actors within the original framework of the project system.

Based on these observations, this paper attempts to explore the following questions by examining the practice of project-based provision of community public services. How can local governments allocate public service resources to the grassroots through the project system effectively? More specifically, the following sub-questions will be addressed: How does the project system operate in community public services provision? What roles do different governance actors play and what functions do they perform in this process? How can structural empowerment optimize the project-based supply of public services in communities?

2. Literature Review and Research Design

2.1. Literature Review

Current researches on project system focus on its operational mechanism and the structural conditions under which it forms. The formation of the project system is closely related to the adjustment of central-local fiscal relationship after the tax-sharing reform. The tax-sharing system enabled a large-scale expansion of central fiscal revenue, centralizing the fiscal power of central government and laying the foundation for large-scale fiscal redistribution (Qu, 2012). The central government sets specific purposes for fiscal funds and distributes them hierarchically in the form of projects. Project-based governance, characterized by the specialization of fiscal funds, has been deeply integrated into the fiscal expenditure practices of

local governments at all levels. However, due to the existence of multiple interests and diverse implementation strategies, a hierarchical operational mechanism has emerged, in which the central government or its departments contract out projects, local governments or their departments package them, and grassroots units grab them (Zhe & Chen, 2011). The project system has positive significance in strengthening direct links between the state and local society, enhancing control over local fiscal operations, and motivating local efforts to achieve policy goals. However, it may not be certain to achieve the expected results in terms of implementing resources at the primary level. In response to this issue, existing studies mainly offer explanations from three perspectives.

From the perspective of fiscal power, centralization of fiscal power upwards strengthens the authority of the higher-level government but decentralizes the financial autonomy of grassroots, resulting in the suspension of fiscal resources. Generally, the power to manage and supervise fiscal funds is concentrated in the higher-level governments or departments. The funds allocated through projects limit the autonomy of the grassroots in using these funds. And the weakening of fiscal autonomy stimulates the profit-seeking tendency of local governments. Project finance has an incentive effect on governance actors. Local governments regard project funds as a way to expand their fiscal revenue. The legitimacy of the project also creates opportunities for local governments to enhance their ability of absorbing fiscal funds. This way of specialized operation of fiscal funds has strengthened the power of central government, but has weakened the ability of local governments, leading to the suspension of state power. Therefore, the use of funds cannot truly achieve the expected effect (Zhou, 2012). The power of fiscal allocation shifts upward, eliminating the drawbacks of the administrative hierarchy system. But it also strengthens the authority of the contracting unit, while neglecting the functions of communication, coordination and supervision of the local actors in the governance process (Qu, 2012).

Another explanation is organizational behavior adaptation. It points out that local governments adopt flexible strategies in policy implementation under the logic of “anti-control”, resulting in a discrepancy between actual implementation and expectations. The project implementation involves governments and stakeholders with different interests and goals, making the project operation process a superposition of multiple behavioral logic. This causes deviations from the original intentions during implementation. For instance, local governments transfer the burden of supporting tasks to alleviate the financial constraints imposed by the project system on themselves (Di, 2015). Meanwhile, attempts to avoid limitations of the administrative hierarchy system and achieve direct supervision on fiscal funds have not changed their inseparable connection with the hierarchical structure. Research indicates that project operation follows the logic of control, while the logic of anti-control of local units is an important factor affecting the effect of implementation at the primary level (Zhe & Chen, 2011). Under the logic of anti-control, behaviors of local and grassroots actors become uncontrollable.

The flexible operation of funds, such as overlapping structures, target substitution, flexible appropriation, and collusion to cover up, is similar to the behaviors in other policy environments (Zhou, 2015). The game of “control” and “anti-control” between the central and local governments makes the project implementation deviate from the original policy goals (Di, 2016). Additionally, insufficient incentives for grassroots actors prevent them from being fully mobilized to solve problems arising in project governance (Gui, 2014). The balance between central domination and local autonomy, as well as bureaucratic performance orientation and citizen demand orientation, also affects the effect of project implementation (Chen, 2014).

From the perspective of clientelism, a patronage structure has formed among political and economic elites at the grassroots, which has influenced benefit distribution of project, resulting in the deviation of the resource allocation outcome from the original goals. The project system is a resource allocation mechanism involving the interaction of stakeholders. The higher-level government uses financial rewards and subsidies to motivate local governments and social entities. This approach relies on the profit-seeking enthusiasm of the project undertakers, but the profit-seeking value is easy to trigger the corruption involving power and money, as well as collusion between officials and businessmen, making the government a regime operator instead of a service provider (Huang, Gong, & Gao, 2014). Also, in the process of resource allocation, political and economic elites at the grassroots have captured the benefits of the project, forming a distribution order dominated by power for the benefit-sharing. This patronage structure has affected the distribution process of project indicators. The capture of elites and the substitution of the structure have led to low efficiency in project governance, making the goals of public service projects difficult to achieve (Li, 2015).

Research above has revealed the unintended consequences of project governance and pointed out the reasons why policy goals have not been achieved. The financial autonomy of primary governments has been weakened during the implementation of the project. Grassroots organizations have adopted “counter-control” strategies to break through institutional constraints. The patronage structure at the primary level has distorted the allocation of resources. It is shown that the project-based governance is both a process of centralization of authority and a dynamic game between the superior government and primary organizations. However, how institutional and structural environment creates an action space for primary organizations has not been noticed sufficiently. The project contractor (central or local government) can restrain the behavior of society through institutional adjustments or strategies. Besides, project-based governance is often regarded as a one-way decision-making process from the top, but society is not just a passive respondent. Project governance can also be a composite process combining top-down decision-making and community autonomy. Thus, this paper further asks: How can local governments reshape the behavior of primary-level organizations by institutional adjustments, to enhance the consistency between primary-level

behavior and policy and to achieve policy goals, while reducing the unintended consequences of project-based governance?

2.2. Perspective and Analytical Framework

In response to these questions, this paper attempts to explain how institutional innovation of local government can enhance the efficiency of the project-based provision of community public services from the perspective of empowerment. The empowerment theory originates from sociology, psychology, and community development practices. It states that enhancing the control power of individuals, organizations, or communities over internal and external resources can improve their ability to cope with life challenges and achieve their goals. Early empowerment theories mainly focused on the psychological sense of control and self-efficacy that individuals gained through participation (Rappaport, 1987). Later, researchers expanded the connotation of “empowerment” and emphasized that it is both an outcome and a multi-level process of collective capacity building (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). Zimmerman has proposed a multi-level framework of empowerment, including control sense, self-efficacy, and participation willingness at the individual level, democratic structure and member participation at the organizational level, and social capital, resource control, and collective action at the community level (Zimmerman, 2000).

- At individual level, community members enhance their autonomy through skill acquisition, participating in public affairs governance, gain a sense of self-worth, and thereby promote community commitment and cooperative spirit as well as community development (Wilson, 1996).
- At organizational level, the structure, functions, and cultural characteristics within the community organization, as well as the cooperation and resource exchanges between organizations, influence the organizations’ ability to exert influence on community policies and service projects (Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004).
- At community level, empowerment is manifested through formation of resource-sharing alliances among community organizations, citizen participation of decision-making process, the accessibility of public service resources, the responsive government structure, and the skills and abilities of citizens to participate in public affairs (Zimmerman, 2000).

Thus, community empowerment has three features: participation of multiple stakeholders in the decision-making process, a complete resource mobilization network, and an open and responsible governance structure. The essence of empowerment is to consciously change the social structure and institutional arrangements that affect the distribution of rules, resources and opportunities, to reshape the relationship between power and responsibility in community governance, and to create institutional conditions for the community initiative. Its fundamental goal is to cultivate self-governance capabilities of community. What it touches upon is the redistribution of power relations and the transformation of institutional struc-

tures within the primary-level governance units.

From the perspective of empowerment, the focus of community project-based governance has shifted from “how to control and manage the community” to “how to guide and activate the community”. Studies on project system from a control perspective mainly focus on the distribution of control rights and the implementation process of “packaging-capturing” strategy, but pay insufficient attention to how the administrative governance at the primary level leads to the structural loss of power of the governance entities. Although community residents and organizations are encouraged to participate in the process of project governance, the structures and systems that support effective participation, autonomous decision-making and action have not yet been possible. The community governance faces the predicament of “government moves but community does not”. The loss of power is manifested as follows:

- At the institutional level, the absence of stable, smooth and effective formal participation ways and decision-making mechanisms has prevented residents’ opinions from being included in public agenda.
- At the resource level, the lack of formal, efficient and sustainable mechanisms for resource mobilization has prevented the effective identification and formation of a resource network.
- At the operational level, the lack of legal, fair and institutionalized opportunities for action has restricted the action space of community subjects, preventing their autonomy from developing.

In the case of this article, the effectiveness improvement of project-based supply of community public service is attributed to the conscious institutional design, which reconstructs the structure and process of primary-level project-based governance, changing the above threefold loss of power predicament, and stimulating the intrinsic vitality of the community. Based on this, an analytical framework consisting of dimensions of institutions, resources, and actions is proposed to analyze how structural empowerment is constructed and functions in the project-based governance of community social services. The paper holds that local governments restructure the decision-making process of project-based governance at primary level, through institutional provision. They have established a resource support mechanism by creating a resource network. They have also established a project implementation mechanism by creating an execution space. These adjustments have changed the operational logic of decision-making power, resource control power, and execution power in the project system, making the community the hub of primary-level governance, thereby promoting the precision of public services, promoting the internal growth of community capabilities, and realizing the standardization of governance order at primary level (**Figure 1**).

The dimension of institution refers to establishing a stable institutional foundation for community members to participate in decision-making by setting up formal rules, procedures, or platforms. It will point to the following questions. What institutionalized participation ways have been established in the project-based

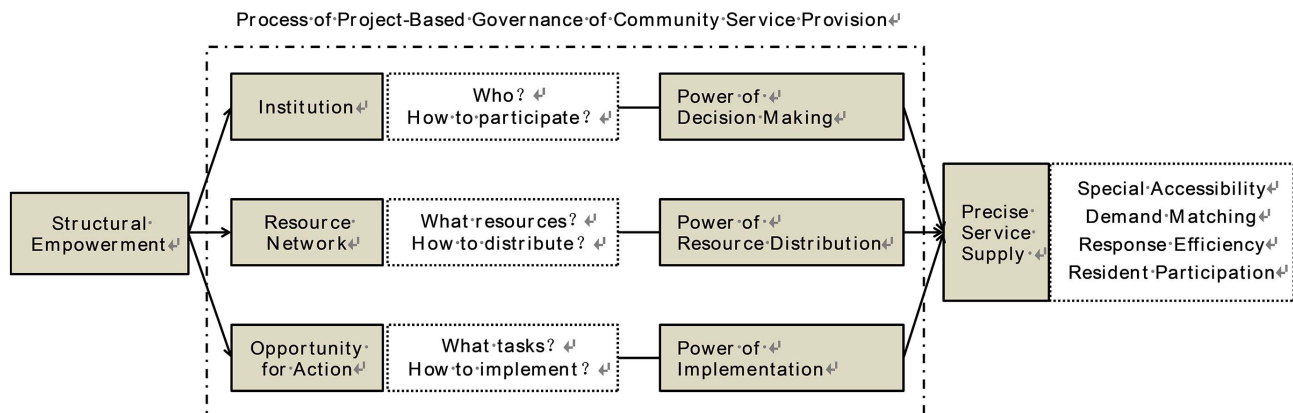


Figure 1. Analytical framework of structural empowerment.

provision of community public services? How do these institutions affect the decision-making process of public service projects? The dimension of resource network focuses on the distribution paths and allocation methods of project resources, referring to promoting the accessibility, sharing, and sustainability of resources through a diverse supporting network, providing a solid material foundation for community public services provision. It will respond to these questions. What kind of resources have been mobilized? How are these resources distributed and allocated? Is it through the traditional administrative system from top to bottom, or does it promote the horizontal flow and connection of resources among different actors through the project platform? The dimension of opportunity for action refers to the actual scope of autonomous actions that the community can obtain. It will respond to these questions. Has the community been granted sufficient discretion and operational autonomy? Can the community decide “how to do it” and conduct innovative exploration independently? Does it have the authority and ability to adjust the provision plan independently? The core is to examine whether the project governance at the primary level has opened up an action field in which the community transforms from a “passive implementer” to an “active decision-maker”.

“Precise public service supply” is treated as an analytical concept rather than a quantified outcome variable. Drawing on the process of project-based social service delivery, it is operationalized along four qualitative dimensions: accessibility, demand matching, response efficiency, and resident participation. Accessibility refers to whether services reach target groups such as older adults and children and are delivered in convenient community spaces. Demand matching refers to the correspondence between project content and residents’ expressed needs. Response efficiency refers to the timeliness with which community actors and service providers adjust project arrangements in response to feedback. Resident participation refers to the actual involvement of residents in decision-making, implementation, and evaluation. These four dimensions are assessed primarily through qualitative materials. In Community B, accessibility is judged through participatory observation and records of participant composition. Demand matching is identified by

comparing resident interviews with project lists. Response efficiency is traced through project adjustment records and related interviews. Resident participation is assessed through deliberation records, observation notes, and resident interviews. These dimensions are therefore identified and interpreted through interviews, participatory observation, and project documents rather than through quantitative measurement.

2.3. Research Design

In recent years, project-based supply has become a mainstream approach for community social services provision in China. Social services targeting multiple groups, for example, elderly care, childcare, family support, disability assistance, and cultural programs, are often integrated into specialized projects and implemented through platforms like community comprehensive service centers and social work stations. These projects are either directly organized and implemented by villages or communities, or outsourced to professional social organizations through service procurement. However, existing research on project-based supply of community social services primarily focuses on the interaction between social organizations and state power (Wang, 2017), while neglecting earlier stages such as project decision-making.

This study employs the method of case study, selecting Community B in Guangdong Province as a typical case. Community B is one of the rural communities in Guangdong Province that have implemented small-scale livelihood projects. By examining the entire process of social service projects from decision-making to implementation, the mechanism and effect of the innovative practice of project-based governance are analyzed, which reshape the way of public services provision at the primary level and cause changes to the structure and process of primary governance. The main actors include relevant government departments at the township level, community self-governing organizations (such as “two committees”), social work organizations, community residents, etc. They are also the interviewees of this study.

The empirical material used in this study mainly includes texts and data collected by field investigation in Community B from May to December 2023. Primary materials were obtained through participatory observation and semi-structured interviews. The community comprehensive service center is the base of the social service projects and activities and is the focus of observation. Interviews were conducted with 3 community workers (such as village “two committees” cadres), 4 service providers (social workers and volunteers), and 5 community residents. Secondary materials such as policy texts, project data, and media reports were collected through the internet and the service center. These materials are the empirical basis for the case analysis in this study.

Community B, originally an administrative village, has changed to community setting around 2005. In the past, the community’s social services were mainly provided by village-level organizations such as the Women’s Federation and the Com-

unist Youth League, which were implemented in a relatively uniform manner irregularly. The situation has changed since 2021, when public welfare service projects for multiple groups have been implemented. These projects can be classified into two types: elder care services for the elderly, which provided free haircuts, medical check-ups, health lectures, traditional cuisine making, and holiday visits, and youth services for children and teenagers, which included handicraft making, food experience, safety education, outdoor expansion, and traditional culture learning. Both types of project activities were organized and implemented in the community's comprehensive service center, and were held two to three times a month. The social service projects implemented in Community B were part of the livelihood service projects at municipal level. Since 2020, the municipal civil affairs department has established a special fund for livelihood projects, aiming to solve the "small, urgent, and difficult" problems at primary level. These projects covered convenience facilities and public welfare services at the community level. From 2023 to 2024, 60 livelihood services (including 48 convenience facilities projects and 12 public welfare services) relying on this special fund have implemented at the street where the Community B is located. Among them, 2 convenience facilities projects and 3 public welfare projects were located in Community B. This article focuses on the overall process of how public welfare projects were implemented, and how relevant actors acted in project-based supply of primary public services.

3. The Process of Project-Based Provision of Community Social Services

In the hierarchical operation of the project system, resources are transferred from the higher-level government to communities through the "contracting-out - packaging - seizing" process. As a provider and contractor of resources, the higher-level government usually makes detailed rules and requirements when contracting projects to ensure the efficiency of resource utilization and the achievement of policy goals. As the recipient of resources, the primary-level organizations need to seek a balance between fulfilling the requirements of the higher authorities and responding to local demands. They often adopt strategic and flexible approaches. However, the case study here reveals a phenomenon worthy of attention. In the process of community social service projects, the community committee did not follow the common "anti-control" logic to implement projects flexibly. Instead, a certain degree of dynamic balance was achieved between administrative control and grassroots empowerment under the refined institutional design of the local government. This institutional arrangement aimed at constraining and guiding the behavior of primary-level organizations, and is specifically constituted by the structured strategies of institutions, resources and actions.

3.1. Participatory Decision-Making

A) Multi-Ways of Public Opinion Collection

A sound channel for expressing demands is the foundation for collecting opinions effectively. Community B has established a diversified platform online and offline, enabling the public to express their demands conveniently. In the meantime, relying on a professional community service team, systematic collection and identification of public opinions is conducted.

Specifically, the identification of residents' preferences and demands in Community B is mainly achieved through two ways. One is that residents actively submit their own demands to the governance entities at municipal, township and community levels. The online channels include the "12345" government service hotline and its website, as well as the official WeChat account, etc. People can place orders through these online platforms themselves. The offline channels rely on the government service centers at the municipal and town levels, as well as the party and mass service centers in villages or communities. Residents can submit their demands and requests, and the staff will enter them into the project information system.

Another more common approach is that service teams of the community proactively identify demands of residents. The community service teams mainly consist of community officials, grid officers, volunteer police officers, social workers and volunteers. They are the main force for demand investigations. Their main responsibilities include daily patrols, information collection, response to emergencies, etc. With the help of the data system at the grid center and the list used for daily visits, they can systematically collect information within the community. For example, the social workers and volunteers of the Community Comprehensive Service Center conducted deep communication with residents through home visits. From October 2021 to March 2022, the front-line social workers completed the first round of home visits and file establishment for the registered personnel, while promoting the implementation of livelihood policies and collecting residents' opinions on community public affairs such as public facilities, environmental hygiene, and leisure life through questionnaires and interviews. They found that the leisure life of community elders was monotonous, and communication was mostly limited to small groups. The social support network needed to be improved. Also, there was a certain scale of children and teenagers from local and migrant families in the community, but platforms for learning, communication and growth were not enough. The community service teams also play the role of service providers and information transmitters. They identify and sort the information based on professional standards and service lists. They evaluated its rationality, policy compatibility and community acceptability, and then feedback it to the community civil affairs officials. It filters out distorted information, improves the accuracy of information entering the decision-making process and lays a reliable foundation for the precise allocation of resources.

B) Consultation and Deliberation within the Community

According to policies of the city of Community B, towns are required to establish their own reserve project libraries and submit them to the civil affairs bureau

of the city every year. The reserve projects are mainly initiated by communities, and their decision-making process is completed at the community level. The core process of decision-making is consultation and negotiation. Consultation and negotiation are carried out through two rounds of meetings within the framework of primary-level self-governance. The first round is a joint meeting composed of the community's two committees. Its main agenda is the preliminary review of project issues, to determine whether the residents' demands meet the criteria for inclusion in the service projects or not. The second round is the consultation and negotiation meeting, with the participants expanding to the stakeholders of the topic, including the community members of two committees, representatives, the community affairs supervision committee, the township government's units stationed in the community, mass organizations, and social organizations. The main agenda is to discuss the specific contents of the project. The form of consultation and negotiation is flexible. It can be carried out by adding consultation sessions in community meetings, shareholders' meetings, or by holding special consultation meetings. In terms of procedures, the meetings are usually convened and chaired by the secretary of the community's Party organization or the director of the community committee, and supervised by the community affairs supervision committee. The topics are discussed item by item, with each participant taking turns to speak, and decisions are made through voting, raising hands and signing. The project can be approved if the number of supporters exceeds half of the attendees. The consultation results are announced through platforms such as the Party affairs and community affairs Publicity Board.

The decision-making process of the social service project in community B follows the procedure above. Information on public demands enters the decision-making process in accordance with the principle of territorial management. Thereafter, it is handed over to communities within the territory through the project information management system. The Party Committee and the Resident Committee immediately hold a joint meeting, where community officials will conduct a preliminary discussion, integrate similar demands, discuss the format of the project, and form a preliminary plan. After the joint meeting, this community held a resident meeting, which was attended by the Party Committee and Resident Committee officials, residents' representatives, the head of the community comprehensive service center, and representatives of potential project contractors. The deliberation and consultation of the residents' meeting focused on discussing the specific implementation plan of the project. The community officials pointed out that although the project implementation guidelines issued by the civil affairs department have macro regulations on the content project, the community still needs to reach a consensus on whether to approve the project or not, especially on matters such as the operation mode, service content, implementation period, service objects and budget. Procedures and results of the deliberation and consultation are both important because the consultation records and project application need to be submitted simultaneously to the township social affairs bureau for approval. According

to the statement of the staff from the public service department, the standardization of the consultation procedure, the comprehensiveness of opinion absorption, and the feasibility of the project plan are important criteria for approval. Social service projects are close to the daily needs of community residents and have universal benefits. They usually do not need to go through competitive application or rely on community officials' promotion by "running for projects".

The diversified channels for soliciting demands have established the pathway for public opinions to enter the policy-making process. The system of community deliberation and consultation has achieved the rational aggregation and transformation of residents' preferences. The participatory decision-making process at the community level converts scattered public opinions into actionable decision-making basis, through institutionalized and structured arrangements. Since the project demand preferences directly stem from the extensive collection, integration, and consultation of community residents, the initiation of social service project is based on solid evidence, precisely aligning with the actual situation of the community, and also laying a solid foundation for subsequent mobilization of residents' participation. The community obtain substantive decision-making autonomy in key aspects such as project initiation, content design, operation model, and selection of contractors for public service projects by the improvement of participatory decision-making.

3.2. Empowering Resource Support

Another aspect of structural empowerment is the establishment of a resource support mechanism. By expanding resource network, adjusting management authority, and standardizing implementation, the process of raising, distributing, and managing money for public service projects is changed, thereby achieving resource empowerment for the community. Adequate and autonomously disposable resources can ensure the continuity and stability of the supply of public services at grassroots. In Community B, institutionalized resource support has three characteristics.

A) A Resource Network with Multiple Entities

Governmental and social resources jointly constitute the resource support network for community social service projects. The resources of the social service project in Community B mainly include funds from fiscal allocations and social resources integrated and absorbed from various organizations, which together constitute complementary and diversified resource support.

Governmental resources are mainly funded by fiscal funds, shared by the municipal and township levels. The special fiscal funds consist of funds allocated by the municipal finance and the matching funds from the town. The municipal funds are allocated to the townships' financial accounts in a lump sum based on factors such as the number of communities under the jurisdiction of the town, the economic total volume, and the administrative area size. The town then allocates the matching funds proportionally according to the amount of municipal funds. The

matching standards are set based on the economic indicators of the town. The municipal funds and the matching funds from the town constitute the special fund pool, which is then uniformly allocated to communities based on the project approval. Funds for community social service projects mainly come from the fund pool. For example, seven social service projects were included in the special expenditure category in the town where Community B is located, with a total investment of approximately 780,000 RMB. Among them, funds of two social service projects in Community B were allocated from the special fund pool.

Social resources include materials, services, professionals, etc., which are mainly obtained through town and community mobilization. The municipal and township governments have established “charity resource banks”, in order to involve enterprises, social organizations and individuals into resource donation. The charity resource bank integrates scattered and unused social and market resources. The town where Community B is located has successfully mobilized organizations such as domestic service enterprises and the New Class Council. Besides, resource mobilization within the community is more common. Through initiatives, announcements and other forms, the community calls on local small and medium-sized enterprises, community experts and other entities to voluntarily participate in service provision. For example, in the “Caring for the Golden Age” elderly service project and the “Youth Together, Bright Growth” youth project carried out in Community B, social forces such as the hospital, domestic service enterprises, barber shops, community elderly volunteer service teams and professional teachers have jointly participated in service provision. However, an officer of Community B pointed out that although fiscal fund is the main source of project resources, for larger communities and service projects with a longer time span, special funds often seem to be relatively tight. The effective introduction of social resources not only fills the funding gap but also enriches the service content and enhances the continuous ability of the project.

B) Community-led Resource Management

The community plays a leading role in the allocation and utilization of project resources. Firstly, the planning and expenditure decisions of funds are made by the community. In the initiation stage, the community determines the project plan through negotiation procedures and formulates budgets and fund usage plans based on actual needs. The township government, on the other hand, determines the allocation amount of funds according to the project requirements and transfers them to the community’s dedicated accounts. The community has the decision-making power for expenditures and does not need to undergo a secondary approval at the town level. The allocation of special funds is carried out by the town’s financial department through authorization to the town’s public service office. The specific process is as follows. After the project is initiated, the community submits application materials for fund allocation (such as service contracts, receipts, etc.) to the public service office. After approval, the funds are obtained and payment vouchers are submitted for archiving and filing after the expenditures. The com-

munity is the direct user and manager of project funds. When the funds are received, the community is responsible for paying the service provider in accordance with the contract. The committee of Community B pays the fees for purchasing services in two stages: a portion of the funds is pre-allocated at the beginning of the project (not exceeding 70% of the total amount) to support project progress, and the remaining funds are paid after the project is completed. This approach not only ensures the community's autonomy in resource utilization but also effectively avoids the constraints on project progress caused by the complex and lengthy approval process. It significantly improves the efficiency and response speed of resource allocation.

In addition to the funds allocated by the higher governments, the community can also coordinate and allocate other social resources based on actual needs. The funds, materials and human resources from different sources have different usage procedures. For the resources integrated by township, the community collaborates and communicates with the relevant platforms before using them. The committee of Community B has designated a civil affairs cadre responsible for coordinating the specific projects. Their main responsibilities include the upward and downward transmission of policy information, communication and coordination with the township-level resource platform. Grassroots service stations such as social workers' stations and home service demonstration stations in the town where Community B is located can assist the community in linking the required resources (such as medical equipment and professionals). The social resources obtained through community mobilization are flexibly allocated by the community according to the type and total amount of resources. In Community B, local enterprises, organizations and individuals have donated materials and services. Due to the lack of resources, the community prioritized the distribution to disadvantaged groups, the elderly and other vulnerable groups, considering the population and family characteristics. Based on a deep understanding of the community, the community committee demonstrates strong flexibility in mobilizing and allocating social resources.

C) Rigidly Constrained Fund Application

Although community enjoys a high degree of autonomy in resource planning and utilization, its fund use still needs to follow clear rules. The use of special funds is strictly and meticulously regulated. The funds jointly raised by the municipal and township governments must have an annual utilization rate of over 95%. The remaining funds should be promptly allocated to the alternative projects in the project pool. This regulation restricts the behavior of towns in allocating funds to communities, effectively reducing the possible phenomena such as procrastination and delay in fund allocation.

The usage of project funds is restricted by the "positive list" and the "negative list". These two lists clearly define the boundaries of the special funds, ensuring that the funds are used exclusively for their intended purposes. Funds are mainly used for the pre-project work and expenditure in the stage of implementation. The

pre-project expenditures include expenses for planning preparation, technical consultation, and bidding agency services. Support for the implementation stage covers service procurement, etc. However, project funds cannot be misappropriated to other projects or used for daily expenses of community comprehensive service facilities. Taking Community B as an example, the community committee used the project funds to purchase services from social service organization, while daily expenses of the community comprehensive service center were included in other expenditures. Although the social service organization undertakes social service projects and the operation of the center at the same time, the two types of expenditures are separately accounted for because they belong to different procurement contents.

In Community B, the local government has established a resource support system that combines empowerment and constraints for the project-based governance of community public services by building a diversified resource network, granting the community resource dominance, and setting rigid usage restrictions. The municipal and township governments are the main entities for fund raising, while the township government and community are responsible for mobilizing social resources. The relevant departments mainly handle fund disbursement and supervision, while the community is responsible for resource utilization and needs to use the special funds according to strict restriction. This system not only enhances the community's ability of resource mobilization and coordination, but also effectively balances the flexibility, standardization and effectiveness of fund usage, thereby providing strong support of resource for the continuous and stable supply of community public services.

3.3. Opportunities for Independent Action

In terms of action, structural empowerment means that communities take the lead in the project implementation of social service, being able to flexibly and precisely provide services based on the local economic situation, cultural characteristics, population structure and residents' needs, which can avoid the mechanical application of superior project guidelines. The community shifts from a "project initiator" to a "project contractor". Its autonomy consists of two aspects.

A) Independent Selection of Service Providers

After resident consultation and approval of project funding, the community can carry out the project based on its own circumstances. The community's discretion over the project is firstly reflected in the selection of service partners.

The project procurement is organized and implemented by the community itself and is not within the scope of government procurement management. The project guidelines stipulate that for public welfare service projects with a large number of beneficiaries, the community should promote them through the methods of purchasing services or overall packaging. The community can independently select service providers that meet the qualification requirements by means of inquiries, competitive negotiations, or competitive discussions. The civil affairs de-

partment has set basic entry requirements for service providers, including civil liability capacity, financial management compliance, and professional personnel configuration. In community B, a project assessment team composed of “two committees” members, community civil affairs cadres and resident representatives, is responsible for formulating criteria for selecting suppliers and organizing evaluations. The selection and evaluation of suppliers is mainly based on indicators such as institutional qualifications, rationality of quotations, and also factors such as the alignment of service plans with community demands, the service reputation of the organization, and project experience. The project assessment team in community B initially selected three social service organizations with strong operational capabilities and previous experience in related project from qualified organizations. Then, they sent invitations to these organizations through an online procurement platform, and conducted a comprehensive assessment of the registered organizations. Finally, the community committees made a collective decision to determine the service provider. When procurement is completed, the community will submit inquiry materials, tender and winning bid documents, contracts and other materials to the public service office for review. Once approved, a contract can be signed. Here, the community has changed from a managed object to the “contractor” of the project who holds the purchasing power.

B) Local Adaptation of Project Content

The autonomy of the community in the implementation of social service projects is also reflected in decisions and adjustments regarding the form and content of projects. In 2020, the original community service center and social worker service points Community B were integrated to enhance the efficiency of social service provision. A platform named “Community Station” was established, through the renovation and utilization of idle spaces. The community comprehensive service center was upgraded into a multi-functional comprehensive service hub, and a stratified service system for all residents and special groups was constructed. Social service projects were implemented through the community comprehensive service center. Besides, a service team composed of professional social workers, community party members, and enthusiastic residents was established through publicity and calls. The service team has held various activities at the community comprehensive service center as its base and carried out regular home visits and service follow-ups for special groups. The creative combination of professional forces and community social capital made service implementation more effective. On the other hand, social service activities were deeply integrated with community culture in Community B. Although the social service projects were entrusted to professional organizations in the form of outsourcing, there was still close contact between the community and social work organizations. The community has participated in project planning and supervision throughout the process. The community proposed to service providers that social service activities should not only meet the material and spiritual needs of residents but also be down-to-earth and have a sense of sentiment. Combining its own, the community and the social

work organizations jointly planned and carried out a series of activities based on historical and cultural characteristics of the community, integrating local culture, such as the production of community traditional cuisine and the experiential activities of festival customs. Thus, cultural inheritance is integrated with community service.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

The project system serves as an important technique for local governments to distribute resources to the grassroots in urban and rural areas. However, it still faces problems in providing public services precisely. This article explores how project governance can enhance the precision of public service supply through structural empowerment, using a case study of project-based social service provision in a community. The study found that participatory decision-making, enabling resource support, and the creation of autonomous action opportunities have achieved empowerment for the community in the domains of grassroots decision-making, resource allocation, and policy implementation. The practice of structural empowerment has reshaped the operational logic of the project system, shifting the use of power in governance from bureaucratic control to community empowerment, the use of financial resources from controlled to enabling, and the responsibility mechanism of primary-level organizations from upward accountability to two-way combined accountability. The essence of these changes is the transfer of power in public service provision to the grassroots, the effective stimulation of the community autonomy in public governance, and its role shifting from the administrative periphery to the governance hub.

The project-based governance contains the tendency of national control and local autonomy, reflecting the reality of how a centralized state can achieve control over local and various social fields. The institutional design of structural empowerment provides a possible balanced path. The top-down decision-making mechanism of the project system enables the state to effectively mobilize and control the society through technical control tools, but the initiative and governance reality at the primary level are often overlooked. Empowering the primary-level society grants it the power to “assign projects”, promoting the integration of local knowledge into local governance and shifting the focus of governance downward, thereby solving the problems of precise and refined governance at the primary level. The significance of structural empowerment lies in that it bridges the tension between the construction of state power and the development of society. The state maintains its dominant position through institutionalized empowerment, avoiding the loss of control over local governance. Communities gain substantive discretionary space and can transform local knowledge into governance effectiveness. The project system transforms from a control tool into an empowerment platform.

Structural empowerment means that governance is not merely about organizational extension, personnel deployment, and an increase in the number of projects.

More importantly, it is about enhancing the subjectivity of grassroots organizations, their governance capabilities, and the standardization of governance behaviors. Recent studies have shown that activating the inherent structural forces of grassroots society and cultivating its autonomous governance capabilities not only helps to improve the effectiveness of project governance but also restores the public value to grassroots governance. For instance, introducing public mobilization mechanisms in community project-based governance through formulating “local policies” to motivate residents’ participation can enhance the collective nature of the community (Wu, 2024).

It should be noted that the conclusions of this article are mainly based on a single community case. Their external validity is limited by factors such as community heterogeneity, support from higher-level pilot programs, leadership promotion, and resource endowment. Whether the mechanism is universally applicable still requires comparison and verification through multiple cases. For the structural empowerment mechanism to operate in other regions, at least the following institutional conditions are necessary: rights and responsibilities list and matters access list for community, stable and coordinated financial resources, flexible auditing and error tolerance, two-way accountability and participatory supervision. At the same time, community organizational capabilities, professional support, the foundation for residents’ participation, and incentive arrangements from the upper-level government, from control to empowerment, are also indispensable. Without these conditions, structural empowerment may degenerate into the downward shifting of responsibilities or formal participation. Future research can further test its boundary conditions and causal mechanisms through multiple case studies or follow-up studies, and on this basis, deepen the integration of community autonomy and project-based governance.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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