

# ***The Logic and Optimization Path of Social Security Policy Design for Landless Farmers—A Grounded Theory Analysis Based on Policy Texts***

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**Abstract.** Rapid urbanization and the continuous improvement of the land expropriation policy system have led to a continuous expansion of the landless farmer population, making their social security a crucial and unavoidable issue in the process of achieving common prosperity. This paper takes the currently effective social security policy texts for landless farmers in China as the object of study, employs grounded theory for three-level coding analysis, and constructs a theoretical model of the policy design logic. Based on this, the study found that the design of social security policies for landless farmers encompasses a complete logical loop, from target identification to implementation and operation, and then to external support. These three aspects are progressive and internally coupled: the policy design takes a "system for strictly and precisely defining beneficiaries " as its logical starting point, ensuring targeted allocation of resources through standardized and comprehensive target identification principles, multi-layered and dynamic identification and implementation processes, and differentiated and precise assistance strategies; it uses a "layered and diversified implementation system" as its operational hub, embedding flexible, diversified, and differentiated institutional arrangements in the payment, fundraising, operation, and disbursement stages to form an incentive-compatible operating mechanism; and it uses a "comprehensive and multi-tiered support system" as its external support.

**Keywords:** Landless farmers, social security, policy design, grounded theory

## **1. Introduction**

As highlighted by *the Report on Urban Development in China (2011)* from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the population of landless farmers in China is projected to swell to approximately 110 million by the year 2030 [1]. In response to this demographic shift, the 2019 amendment to *the Land Administration Law* formally integrated compensation principles designed to safeguard the livelihood and prior living standards of these affected individuals. This legislative momentum has been mirrored by increasingly robust policy efforts to protect farmers' fundamental rights [2]. Specifically, the *Implementation Regulations of the Land Administration Law* now demand that local governments not only finalize land compensation payments promptly but also ensure such funds are strictly ring-fenced for their intended use [3]. From an administrative standpoint, the Division of

Rural Social Insurance has underscored the imperative of fostering high-quality expansion in the basic old-age insurance framework for both urban and rural residents [4]. While academia has scrutinized these issues through various lenses—ranging from institutional frameworks to social integration—critical gaps remain. Issues such as the erosion of traditional "land-for-security" concepts, the precarious nature of lump-sum monetary payouts, and the identity crises faced by farmers entering urban life continue to challenge the sustainability of current models. This study, therefore, parses relevant policy documents to decode the underlying design logic and seek viable optimization paths.

## 2. Literature review

Early studies mainly focused on social conflicts triggered by land expropriation and infringements on farmers' rights and interests. For example, a survey of 632 farmers who submitted petitions in Beijing showed that land-related issues accounted for over 65% of all rights-protection incidents initiated by farmers. Among these, unfair compensation for land expropriation was identified as the main trigger [5]. As research has deepened, the structural predicaments facing landless farmers have grown more apparent. During their transition to urban housing, these farmers encounter structural risks at both the material and non-material levels. Material risks include insufficient compensation and inadequate social security coverage; non-material risks involve the loss of social capital, along with difficulties in adaptation and transition. The former stems from excessively low land expropriation compensation standards, which often fail to reflect increases in land value. The latter is manifested in the alienation of close-knit social networks and the weakening of trust relationships [6], ultimately leading to a structural disconnection from the modern urban system [7]. These studies collectively indicate that the issues of landless farmers have evolved from a simple matter of economic compensation into a complex social problem, covering livelihood patterns, social integration, psychological adaptation and other dimensions. Early research mainly focused on the institutional defects existing in land expropriation compensation and resettlement schemes, identifying prevalent problems such as unreasonably low compensation standards (which fail to factor in land value appreciation) and the lack of diverse resettlement options [8]. To address these challenges, various regions have explored innovative models, such as "exchanging land for social security." Based on data from the China Health and Retirement Longitudinal Study (CHARLS), the implementation of land-expropriation-linked pension insurance was found to significantly reduce the probability of rural elderly individuals relying on the traditional strategy of "raising children to provide for old age" by 28.7%; it also reduces their reliance on intergenerational financial support provided by their children. In contrast, the one-off compensation for losses caused by land expropriation has not yielded similar effects, mainly because such lump-sum payments usually lack long-term financial planning and tend to be exhausted in a short period of time [9]. In terms of coverage, the disparities in social security standards between landless farmers and urban residents are fundamentally attributed to factors including labor income, educational attainment and employment types [10]. Therefore, this paper adopts grounded theory to encode and analyze policy documents related to the social security of landless farmers. It aims to reveal the core logic, internal models and optimization paths of policy design, so as to provide theoretical support for improving relevant policies and promote the better integration of landless farmers into urban society.

### 3. Research design

#### 3.1. Selection of policy texts and corpus construction

The policy text serves as the materialized carrier of the government's governance intentions and action logic, providing researchers with authoritative and observable analytical materials [11]. To ensure the authority, representativeness and comprehensiveness of the research, this paper follows the principles of authoritative sources, diverse types and relevant content, and systematically collects the current policy documents on the social security of landless farmers in China. This study utilized the official websites of the State Council, provincial-level governments (provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities directly under the Central Government), and municipal and county (district) governments as primary sources. These were supplemented by the websites of relevant competent authorities at various levels—such as the Departments (Bureaus) of Human Resources and Social Security and the Departments (Bureaus) of Natural Resources—to search for and collect relevant policy texts using keywords such as "expropriated farmers," "landless farmers," "social security," and "endowment insurance." Based on the time sequence of policy releases in each province, the search time range is set from January 2005 to January 2026, covering the key stages of the establishment, reform and improvement of the social security system for landless farmers in China. After preliminary screening and sorting, a total of 86 policy documents of various types, including guidelines, management methods and implementation details, were obtained. From the final set of 70 documents, 41 were randomly selected to serve as the primary sample for coding analysis (see Table 1), while the remaining 29 were reserved for testing theoretical saturation.

Table 1. Policy text data sheet (excerpt)

No.	Sample Name (Partial Selection)	Sample Level	Date of Issuance
1	Notice of the Department of Human Resources and Social Security of Guangdong Province on Further Improving Social Security Work for Farmers Whose Land Has Been Expropriated and Refining Relevant Policies	Provincial Level	2025
2	Notice of the People's Government of Maoming City on Issuing the "Measures for the Implementation of Further Improving Pension Security Policies for Farmers Whose Land Has Been Expropriated in This City"	Municipal Level	2023
3	Notice of the Office of the People's Government of Shunde District, Foshan City, on Issuing the "Implementation Plan for Pension Security for Farmers Whose Land Has Been Expropriated in Shunde District"	District (County) Level	2022
4	Notice of the People's Government of Jiangsu Province on Issuing the Measures for Social Security of Farmers Whose Land Has Been Expropriated in Jiangsu Province	Provincial Level	2021
...	...	...	...
41	Notice of the People's Government of Tonghua City on Issuing the "Measures of Tonghua City on Subsidies for Contributions to Basic Old-Age Insurance by Farmers Whose Land Has Been Expropriated"	Municipal Level	2025

### 3.2. Research methodology: grounded theory and its applicability

Instead of starting with any fixed theoretical assumptions, this research method pulls concepts and categories directly from raw empirical data—through coding, induction, and comparison—and eventually builds a core theory that explains the phenomenon under study [12]. The method keeps theory and data in constant, close conversation with each other, which makes it especially useful for exploratory work on complex social issues [13]. For one thing, China's social security policy system for landless farmers has come together over many years, with all sorts of different components and a fairly complex institutional structure—exactly the kind of setting where grounded theory tends to work well. For another, the main goal here is to uncover the hidden design logic behind relevant policies. That purpose fits nicely with the core idea of grounded theory, which is "building theory from data," and it also supports the study's need to develop a theoretical framework right out of policy practice [14].

### 3.3. Three-stage coding process

Procedural grounded theory's coding procedures were rigorously adhered to throughout this study. Using NVivo 15, each of the 41 policy texts in the corpus underwent open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, analyzed one by one.

#### 3.3.1. Open coding: from policy texts to initial categories

Open coding means going through the original materials word by word, picking out and marking phenomena related to the research topic, and then working out the conceptualization and refinement [12]. At this stage, each policy clause was analyzed and tagged in detail, and initial concepts were drawn as directly from the original policy statements as possible. Take the provision that says "incorporating farmers whose land is to be expropriated into the appropriate old-age insurance system" — this was boiled down to the concept of "comprehensive coverage" (ensuring that everyone eligible is covered). Likewise, the rule that "land expropriation shall not be approved if social security funding has not been fully secured" was reduced to the concept of "prior coverage" (i.e., ensuring social security is in place before expropriation occurs).

Table 2. Open coding (excerpts)

No.	Initial Category	Original Policy Text (Partial)
A1-1	Comprehensive Coverage of Eligible Beneficiaries	All eligible farmers whose land has been expropriated have been fully included in the social security coverage. All relevant policies on land expropriation social security have been fully implemented to ensure that all eligible rural residents whose land has been expropriated can legally enjoy social security contribution subsidies...
A2-1	Multi-Tiered Review Procedures for Social Security Beneficiaries	The identity verification of social security recipients for landless farmers implements the "Three Reviews and Two Public Notices" working mechanism, which consists of preliminary review by villages (communities), re-examination by township (sub-district) governments, examination and approval by people's governments of districts, counties (cities), as well as public notice at the village (community) level and public notice at the district, county (city) level...
...	...	...

Table 2. (continued)

B1-1	Implementation of Differentiated Social Security Measures	Farmers whose land has been expropriated shall—based on their specific circumstances and in accordance with regulations—participate in either the Basic Old-Age Insurance for Enterprise Employees (hereinafter referred to as "Employee Old-Age Insurance") or the Basic Old-Age Insurance for Urban and Rural Residents (hereinafter referred to as "Resident Old-Age Insurance")...
B2-1	Ensuring Fund Mobilization Through Multiple Channels	The sources of social security funds for farmers whose land has been expropriated include: (I) social security funds for expropriated farmers allocated in accordance with regulations; (II) provincial-level subsidies; (III) funds drawn from revenue generated by the compensated use of state-owned land, amounting to no less than 1% of such revenue; and (IV) resettlement subsidies designated for social security purposes in accordance with regulations...
...	...	...
C1-1	Comprehensive, End-to-End Oversight of Funds	No organization or individual is allowed to withhold, misappropriate, embezzle, fraudulently obtain or corruptly acquire funds, nor is it permitted to use these funds to balance the fiscal budget. Measures must be taken to prevent the funds from being withheld, misappropriated, embezzled, fraudulently obtained, corrupted, lent out or - without authorization - used for any form of direct or indirect investment; moreover, any violation of laws and regulations must be promptly dealt with and resolved...
...	...	...

### 3.3.2. Axial coding: refinement and integration of main categories

The core task of axial coding is to discover and establish logical connections among the initial categories, condensing them into main categories that possess a higher hierarchical level and greater generality. At this stage—building upon the foundation of open coding—this study conducted an in-depth analysis of the logical interconnections among the initial categories. Following multiple rounds of comparison and abstraction, the 45 initial categories were ultimately synthesized into 11 main categories. The results of the axial coding are detailed in Table 3.

Table 3. Axial coding (excerpts)

No.	Main Category	Initial Category
A1	Principles for Identifying Standardized and Comprehensive Eligible Recipients	Full Coverage of All Eligible Recipients; Strict and Standardized Criteria for Identifying Landless farmers; Principle of "Matching Individuals with Corresponding Land Expropriation"
A2	Multi-Level Review and Dynamic Management for Identification and Implementation	Multi-Level Review Procedures for Eligible Recipients; Dynamic Adjustment Mechanism for Eligible Recipients; Requirement of Simultaneous Social Security Upon Land Expropriation; Localized Qualification Identification System for Eligible Recipients
A3	Differentiated and Targeted Social Security Strategies	Special Arrangements for Vulnerable Groups Participating in the Scheme; Age-Based Classification Method for Eligible Recipients; Principles for Handling Elderly Landless Farmers; Definition of Ineligible Participant Categories

Table 3. (continued)

B1	Flexible Contribution Modes	Implementation of Categorized Social Security Provision; Differentiated Local Policies on Lump-Sum Back Payment for Employees' Endowment Insurance; Optional Contribution Standards and Corresponding Benefits for Endowment Insurance; Personal Account Fund Injection and Supplementary Payment for Insufficient Balances
B2	Diversified Funding Methods	Multi-Channel Fundraising for Social Security Funds; Hierarchical Fiscal Sharing of Funding Responsibilities; Principle of "Whoever Uses the Land Bears the Cost"; Category-Based Fundraising by Land Expropriation Batches and Types; Funding Linked to Comprehensive Land Section Prices
B3	Standardized and Sustainable Operation Mechanism	Participation Incentives Such as "Contribute First, Receive Later"; Operation Principle of Preserving and Increasing Fund Value; Organizational Principle of Territorial Management and Hierarchical Responsibility; Sustainable Development of Social Security Funds Based on Expenditure-Determined Revenue
B4	Benefit Disbursement Principles with Both Fairness and Differentiation	Categorized Contribution Subsidy Standard System; Lump-Sum Payment Under Special Circumstances; Requirement That Benefits Exceed Subsistence Allowance Standard; Dynamic Adjustment of Benefit Standards; Multi-Purpose and Comprehensive Social Security Benefits; Age-Based Rules for Subsidy Duration Setting
C1	Multi-Dimensional Supervision and Feedback Mechanism	Full-Chain Supervision of Funds; Investigation and Punishment of Illegal Participation; Accountability for Violations; Supervision and Inspection of Policy Implementation; Open and Transparent Implementation of Security Policies
C2	Principle of "Secure Benefits Before Expropriation"	Principle of "Guarantee First, Expropriation Later"; Standards for Establishing Risk Reserve System; Long-Term Security Mechanism Focusing on Follow-Up Protection; Supporting Measures for Employment and Entrepreneurship
C3	Smooth Transfer and Continuation Mechanism	Smooth Transition Between Old and New Policies; Eligibility to Apply for Subsistence Allowance and Social Assistance; Coordination, Contribution and Conversion of Endowment Insurance Systems; Personal Account Refund and Inheritance Mechanism
C4	Coordinated Implementation Support Measures	Multi-Departmental Coordination and Cooperation; Standards for Construction of Security Information System

### 3.3.3. Selective coding: identification of core categories and model construction

The objective of selective coding is to identify, from among all main categories, a "core category" capable of subsuming and synthesizing the others, and to interlink them in the form of a storyline to construct a comprehensive theoretical framework [15].

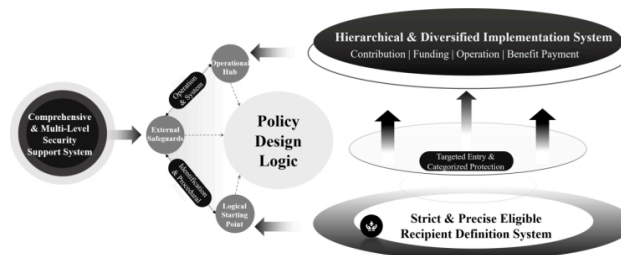


Figure 1. Theoretical model for the design of social security policies for landless farmers in China

## **4. Core analysis: the logic and optimization of social security policy design for landless farmers**

Based on the three-level coding process of Grounded Theory, this study identifies three core categories: a "system for strictly and precisely defining beneficiaries", a "layered and diversified implementation system" and a "comprehensive and multi-tiered support system".

### **4.1. The core logic of policy design: the intrinsic coupling of three major systems**

#### **4.1.1. Who is being protected: a system for strictly and precisely defining beneficiaries**

What social security policy for landless farmers tries to do first and foremost is to pin down exactly who the policy is meant to cover. If the criteria for defining those beneficiaries are vague, or if implementation strays from the stated goals, then all sorts of governance problems are likely to follow. A proper set of beneficiary identification criteria—complete and standardized—is the institutional foundation that makes the system work. The standardization of these principles is most visible in the strict certification requirements for landless farmers and in the principle that links beneficiaries directly to specific land holdings. Policy documents generally say that beneficiaries must meet multiple core preconditions at once: for instance, holding land contracting rights at the time of expropriation and having local hukou registration. Then there's the combined process of multi-level review and dynamic management, which is the key mechanism for carrying out these principles. Policy documents often include procedural rules like the "three reviews and two public notices" or the "five deliberations and two public disclosures," building a multi-tier review chain. That chain goes through three main stages: initial review at the village (or community) level, a second review at the township (or sub-district) level, and final approval at the district or county level. A transparent public disclosure system also plays a role, ensuring full visibility throughout the entire process.

#### **4.1.2. How to provide coverage: a layered and diversified implementation system**

A look at the policy texts indicates that a well-developed policy design always consists of four interrelated components—contribution, financing, operation, and benefit disbursement—which together form a closed-loop institutional system characterized by incentive compatibility and smooth functioning. First, flexible contribution models are put in place to encourage beneficiary participation and respect their right to choose. Through the provision of optional contribution approaches, the policy allows landless farmers to decide for themselves—based on their own economic circumstances and future expectations—whether to join the employee-based pension insurance scheme or the resident-based pension insurance scheme, and accordingly select an appropriate contribution level. Second, diversified financing methods serve as a vital foundation for the sustainable operation of the social security system. Policy documents establish a financing framework that features multi-stakeholder burden-sharing—involving governments, collectives, and individuals—guided by the principle that "whoever utilizes the land bears the cost." Third, a standardized and sustainable operational mechanism prioritizes fund security as well as the preservation and appreciation of fund value. More specifically, the policy sets out the organizational principle of "territorial management and hierarchical responsibility," defining the administrative duties of governments at each level—for example, stating that "people's governments at all levels must earnestly fulfill their primary responsibility regarding social security for farmers whose land has been expropriated." Fourth, the benefit disbursement principles, characterized by the coexistence

of equity and differentiation, underscore the core values of the system. Equity is reflected in the baseline benefit standards; for instance, there is a universal stipulation that benefits must be higher than the minimum living allowance standard, thus ensuring that the basic living standards of landless farmers do not decline.

#### **4.1.3. How to ensure stability: a comprehensive, multi-tiered support system**

An isolated institutional framework cannot sustain long-term development. Likewise, the design of social security policies for landless farmers relies on a solid supporting system to make sure implementation actually works. First, the principle of "sustainable, long-term security" shifts the policy's focus from one-time compensation to the long-term livelihoods of beneficiaries. At the core of this principle is "secure benefits before expropriation" — meaning that before any land expropriation project gets approved, the required social security funds must be fully deposited ahead of time. Second, a streamlined transfer and connection mechanism addresses the real-world needs of landless farmers who move between different regions or across different social security systems. Third, a multi-dimensional supervision and feedback mechanism acts as a critical safeguard, keeping policy implementation aligned with its original goals and preventing misuse of funds. Policy documents lay out a multi-dimensional supervision network centered around comprehensive, end-to-end oversight of funds, allowing for continuous monitoring from the moment funds are deposited all the way to the final distribution of benefits. Fourth, the collaborative implementation mechanism directly tackles the practical difficulties of coordination among government departments when carrying out the policy. Because social security services for landless farmers involve multiple authorities — including those in charge of natural resources, human resources and social security, finance, public security, agriculture and rural affairs, and auditing — relevant policies explicitly call for a cross-departmental coordination and collaboration mechanism.

#### **4.2. Optimization pathways for policy design**

The logical chain—covering "who is covered," "how coverage is provided," and "sustainability of coverage"—reflects the ideal policy design. Even so, the criteria for identifying beneficiaries still need some refinement, the implementation phase is not yet sufficiently incentive-compatible, and the supporting system's constraints could be tighter. So targeted optimization should begin at the very source of policy design.

##### **4.2.1. Defining beneficiaries: from clear principles to precise operations**

Principles like "linking people to land" and "determining quotas based on land holdings" offer a clear direction for identifying eligible beneficiaries; however, being clear at the principled level is not the same as being precise at the operational level. In practice, for groups whose household registration (hukou) has become separated from their land contracting rights—due to marriage, schooling, military service, or similar reasons—local authorities apply inconsistent rules for inclusion or exclusion. The way forward is to turn these principles into workable, detailed provisions. A unified information management platform for landless farmers could be built, linking data from the natural resources, public security, and agriculture and rural affairs departments, so that cross-departmental data matching can happen in real time. At the same time, the calculation method for "determining quotas based on land holdings" should be refined: instead of relying on a simple per-capita land area threshold, it should shift to a tiered coefficient-based management system, with

differentiated criteria developed according to regional differences in arable land resources and demographic structures. For dynamic management, measures such as monthly reporting and quarterly verification can help shorten the lag in information updates.

#### **4.2.2. Implementation and operations: striking a balance between incentives and sustainability**

Four key stages — premium payment, fund raising, operational management, and benefit distribution — make up the basic framework of the implementation system; even so, several weak links still exist within this framework. The "pay-first, subsidize-later" design is meant to reinforce individual responsibility; yet for landless farmers with unstable incomes, having to front the premium payment itself becomes a major barrier — one that has led some individuals to drop out of the scheme entirely. To address these challenges, a better balance needs to be struck between incentives and long-term sustainability. As for the contribution phase, experimentation with "immediate subsidy upon collection" and "monthly deduction" mechanisms could be carried out, where subsidies go directly to social security administrative agencies, thereby reducing the upfront payment burden on individuals. On the funding side, diversified revenue sources should be realized. Beyond land transfer income, matching funds ought to be allocated from the general public budget, and the feasibility of bringing social capital into the development of supplementary pension security should also be explored.

#### **4.2.3. Strengthening support mechanisms: from nominal to substantive coordination**

Support mechanisms such as supervision, policy convergence, and implementation are often comprehensively formulated in policy texts, yet comprehensiveness in text does not equal smoothness in implementation. The principle of guaranteeing security prior to land acquisition has been repeatedly emphasized, yet various problematic phenomena tend to emerge amid strained local fiscal resources. To enable the support system to deliver its intended functions effectively, it is imperative to shift from superficial nominal coordination to substantive, efficient collaboration. First, the legal standing of the principle of "prior social security coverage, subsequent land acquisition" must be elevated. Furthermore, legal liabilities must be explicitly defined for acts involving the use of forged documents. Meanwhile, a multi-level public disclosure system should be established to ensure that supervision is no longer confined to mere written provisions in official documents. Secondly, by leveraging the unified government data sharing platform, key links such as land acquisition approval, fund prepayment, beneficiary verification and fund disbursement should be integrated into an efficient online joint processing system, so as to minimize delays and errors caused by manual document handling. Third, it is essential to clearly affirm a fundamental principle: the social security rights and interests of landless farmers are statutory rights automatically generated by land acquisition, and such rights shall not be premised on farmers' consent to relocation.

## **5. Conclusion**

By applying grounded theory to systematically decode China's policy landscape regarding landless farmers' social security, this research has distilled the core logic driving policy architecture. The findings show that a robust policy design relies on the synergy of three functional domains. First, the "system for strictly and precisely defining beneficiaries" acts as the logical inception point; it facilitates accurate resource channeling through multi-level verification and differentiated targeting

strategies. Second, the "layered and diversified implementation system" serves as the operational engine. By integrating flexible contribution tiers and diversified funding streams, it creates an incentive-compatible framework for long-term sustainability. Finally, the "comprehensive and multi-tiered support system" provides the necessary external scaffolding. This includes ensuring "secure benefits before expropriation," maintaining seamless system transfers, and enforcing interdepartmental coordination. Collectively, these components form a coherent policy cycle designed to mitigate the risks of urbanization and promote social equity.

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