

The Internal Logic and Practical Pathways of Rural Collective Economic Organizations Empowering Rural Elderly Care Services

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Abstract. As the core carrier driving rural economic development and governance, rural collective economic organizations have inherent potential to empower elderly care amid the increasingly severe rural aging problem. Through literature review and multi-case analysis, this paper systematically explores the internal logic, practical problems and optimization pathways of rural collective economic organizations empowering rural elderly care services. Driven by both the external demand of individual vulnerability and the internal momentum of collective empowerment, rural collective economic organizations possess empowerment potential in three dimensions: political, economic and cultural. However, unclear property right definition, mismatch between supply and demand, and limited benefit delivery restrict the empowerment pathways of collective economic organizations. To this end, targeted governance and improvement of obstacles in the empowerment pathways should be carried out from three aspects: clarifying property right definition, building hierarchical systems, and strengthening multi-stakeholder collaboration, so as to ensure that collective economic organizations play their role in empowering rural elderly care services.

Keywords: rural collective economic organizations, elderly care services, multi-stakeholder collaboration

1. Introduction

The frequent occurrence of the "urban-rural inversion" phenomenon, coupled with the increasingly severe trend of population aging, has made elderly care services in rural areas a core focus. Forecast data show that by 2025, the proportion of people aged 65 and above in China's rural areas will exceed 20%, and rural areas as a whole will enter the "advanced aging" stage [1]. Against this background, how to shore up the weaknesses of rural elderly care services has become a shared goal for China to address population aging and promote the Rural Revitalization Strategy. Meanwhile, the development of China's rural collective economic organizations has achieved both structural reshaping and functional expansion. As of 2023, the asset scale of rural collective economic organizations nationwide has exceeded 9 trillion yuan [2], which directly lays an important material foundation for rural elderly care services. Academic research on rural elderly care and collective economy includes both the impact of specific subjects within rural collective economic

organizations on rural elderly care — for example, Party organizations drive the development of rural elderly care through operation mode transformation and farmer organization, specialized cooperatives feed back rural elderly care causes through interest linkage and distribution mechanisms, and strong-village common prosperity companies participate in elderly care services through market-oriented operation — and the expansion of rural elderly care service types under rural collective economic organizations, such as mutual-aid elderly care, integrated medical and elderly care, and AI-powered elderly care. However, most studies place the two in independent frameworks respectively, lacking in-depth analysis and demonstration of the core connection mechanism between them. Based on this, this paper focuses on the core topic of "rural collective economic organizations empowering rural elderly care services". By sorting out previous studies and conducting multi-case investigations, it explains the deficiencies of current research and puts forward the research content and questions of this paper, so as to provide practical reference and guidance for solving the rural elderly care dilemma.

2. Literature review and research questions

The two major research fields of rural elderly care and collective economic organizations have gradually shifted from "parallel evolution" to "integrated development". In early years, the two studies formed separate systems: most studies attributed rural elderly care problems to the responsibilities of families, communities or the government, and regarded collective economic organizations only as economic organizations to promote rural revitalization. However, with the urgent need to solve rural elderly care problems and the in-depth advancement of rural revitalization, scholars have gradually realized that the collective economy is not only an economic issue, but also a key variable related to rural grassroots governance. Without this carrier, the supply of rural public services will also face the risk of "suspension".

In terms of research on rural elderly care services, the academic circle has deeply analyzed the dilemma identification and type innovation of rural elderly care services. In dilemma identification, researchers generally point out that rural elderly care currently faces structural contradiction dilemmas in four dimensions: population, supply and demand, consumption and development, and systematically reveals the prominent problems of "horizontal fragmentation" and "vertical rupture" in the rural elderly care service system [3]. In terms of type innovation, integrated medical and elderly care and mutual-aid elderly care have become two mainstream forms. For example, the traditional scattered neighborhood mutual aid has been upgraded to a village-level centralized mutual-aid elderly care model of "integrated mutual support" based on the village-level economic community [4]; it is also pointed out that the organizational forms of rural mutual-aid elderly care are mainly divided into three types: government-led, villager self-governance, and elite-driven [5]. At the research level of rural collective economic organizations, the core concern has shifted from how to "divide the cake well" to how to "make the cake bigger", that is, the academic circle has begun to pay attention to the improvement of the governance structure and operation efficiency of collective economic organizations. For example, due to limitations such as soft budget constraints caused by multiple goals, imperfect internal governance mechanisms, and inapplicability of the bankruptcy law, collective economic organizations have limited ability to participate in the market, and have begun to transform into "managers" focusing on asset integration, asset operation and maintenance, and policy implementation [6]. The proposal of this view makes the academic circle no longer limit the empowerment of rural collective economic organizations to "economic income generation". The further constructed three-dimensional functional analysis framework of politics, economy and society of rural collective economic organizations also regards the organizations as an

important hub connecting the state, society and the market [7]. These research findings lay a theoretical foundation for explaining the participation of collective economic organizations in rural elderly care governance. At the research level of rural collective economic organizations empowering rural elderly care services, research on the two is still in its infancy, but the formed value consensus has also laid a solid foundation for subsequent research. Combined with research findings, "empowerment" can be divided into four pathways. First, empowerment through organizational carrier. Collective economic organizations effectively reduce the transaction costs of mutual-aid elderly care by building a repeated game environment and providing standardized institutional supply, and finally solve the collective action dilemma [8]. Second, empowerment through material resources. The development and growth of the collective economy provides "second finance" support for rural elderly care services, and provides "solid support" for rural elderly care services by integrating idle assets, coordinating financial funds and collective income. Third, empowerment through value co-creation. For example, it analyzes how rural elites promote the value cohesion, transformation and consolidation of rural mutual-aid elderly care through authority appeal, resource operation and emotional bonding to realize value co-creation [9], among which resource operation and interest linkage are exactly the ways for rural collective economic organizations to play their role. Fourth, empowerment through institutional guarantee. The institutional guarantee mechanisms of "interest linkage" and "democratic voting" in the research on surplus distribution of specialized cooperatives established with equity participation of rural collective economic organizations bring important enlightenment to the benefit distribution of rural elderly care services.

However, it is worth noting that: first, the research perspective is "separated" and "marginalized"; second, the research on internal mechanism is in a "black box" state, and most studies only stay at the judgment and macro narrative of "collective economic organizations can promote elderly care"; third, there is a lack of localization in theoretical construction. Therefore, the core research questions of this paper are: In what way do rural collective economic organizations empower rural elderly care services? What internal logic does this way follow? What new empowerment obstacles will emerge in this process? And what ideas and countermeasures should be adopted to solve them? Focusing on these questions, this paper will conduct in-depth exploration combined with multiple cases to make up for the gaps in existing research.

3. Internal logic of rural collective economic organizations empowering rural elderly care services

3.1. Increasing individual vulnerability: external demand for empowerment

The reason why rural elderly people become vulnerable subjects of empowerment lies in three levels of individual vulnerability: economic individual vulnerability, ability individual vulnerability, and social individual vulnerability. The progressive escalation of these three problems makes the rural elderly care problem increasingly serious [10].

3.1.1. Economic individual vulnerability

Economic individual vulnerability is mainly manifested in low income, weak payment capacity, difficulty in asset realization, and insufficient risk savings of rural elderly people. Unlike the regular institutional pensions of urban retired elderly people, a small number of rural elderly people live on alimony from their children, while the majority still rely on the output of land cultivation for a single

source of income. However, agricultural returns are often affected by both nature and the market, with large fluctuations. In 2023, nearly 20% of rural collective economic organizations nationwide still had no operating income, and the average dividend for members was only tens to hundreds of yuan, which cannot effectively support individual economic security [10]. The dilemma of single and unstable income constitutes the core manifestation of the economic individual vulnerability of the elderly, making rural elderly care urgently need the empowerment of collective economic organizations.

3.1.2. Ability individual vulnerability

Ability individual vulnerability mainly refers to the situation where elderly people cannot use their own skills to utilize external resources to improve their own conditions due to multiple factors such as physical condition and age. First, elderly people have low educational attainment, blocked information access, and a serious digital divide. Considering the differences in urban and rural education levels, the narrow geographical scope of rural areas, and various reasons such as the inconvenience of elderly people to travel and receive external cultural influence, rural elderly people have difficulty receiving good cultural education through multiple channels and obtaining information from outside the village. Second, elderly people face dual obstacles of physical function and intelligence. After middle age, most people's physical functions and intelligence may show a downward trend with age. Those elderly people who still have remaining labor force can only engage in low-value-added manual labor to make a living without technical training, and cannot realize "experience appreciation" through skills [11].

3.1.3. Social individual vulnerability

Social individual vulnerability is a common problem among rural elderly people, which refers to the fact that rural elderly individuals gradually lack recognition and sense of belonging to rural social groups in the acquaintance social network, and cannot participate in rural public affairs through multiple channels. This phenomenon can be roughly attributed to three reasons. First, the function of family elderly care is weakened, and intergenerational support is fractured. The perennial migration of children has led to a continuous rise in the proportion of "empty-nest elderly" in rural areas. The traditional concept of "raising children for old-age support" has been broken, and the vertical connection between children and parents has fractured. Second, individuals have difficulty integrating into society. Under the subtle influence of modern concepts, individual trust in groups continues to decline. Especially for elderly people living alone in rural areas, who always stick to the idea of "each plays his own tune", the traditional concept of mutual help within rural groups and "neighbors are like family" is increasingly fading, making it impossible for elderly people to independently integrate into social groups. Finally, public participation channels are unsmooth and insufficient.

3.2. Emergence of collective resilience: internal momentum for empowerment

As a connecting channel between the government and rural grassroots levels, collective economic organizations play an irreplaceable internal role in empowering elderly care. Relevant studies clearly point out that "rural collective economic organizations are encouraged to develop elderly care services", positioning them as an important force for empowering rural elderly care services.

3.2.1. Economic empowerment dimension

Rural collective economic organizations provide sustainable economic benefits through various ways such as resource integration and redistribution, reducing farmers' transaction costs, and technical training, bringing economic empowerment to rural elderly care services. First, integrate and redistribute resources to feed back elderly care. Rural collective economic organizations integrate scattered land and idle funds into a unified resource pool, and revitalize them through leasing, contracting, equity participation and other ways. The obtained income is used for medical insurance payment on behalf of individuals, pension distribution and infrastructure maintenance in a certain proportion. Second, reduce farmers' transaction costs and improve collaboration efficiency. Since collective economic organizations master the basic information of the elderly, they can centrally handle links such as information collection, negotiation and mediation, and supervision, avoiding high costs paid by individuals due to insufficient or scattered information. Third, carry out technical training to realize rural economic operation. For young elderly people who have the willingness and ability to work, collective economic organizations invite agricultural technical experts to provide technical training in planting and breeding, agricultural product processing, etc., or train qualified elderly care workers and psychological counselors to give priority to employment.

3.2.2. Political empowerment dimension

As the political and institutional guarantee for elderly care services, rural collective economic organizations not only ensure the decision-making power of the elderly in village governance, but also set up specific positions for the elderly to participate in rural governance. First, rural collective economic organizations enjoy the decision-making power on major matters in accordance with the proportion of shares in resource integration. Relevant decisions also need to be voted and passed by the member congress composed of these farmers. This regulation directly endows the elderly with the right to speak on issues related to their own interests. Second, rural collective economic organizations also set up elderly positions, such as policy publicity, conflict mediation, democratic appraisal and other work, and formulate time bank and point systems to allow young elderly people to serve the elderly. For those elderly people who perform well in their jobs, rural collective economic organizations give them reputation rewards through commendation and story publicity, promoting the effective integration of the elderly into social governance.

3.2.3. Cultural empowerment dimension

Collective actions realize mutual aid by building emotional bonds and a repeated game environment, condensing every individual in rural areas into a warm and affectionate community. Rural collective economic organizations constantly build appropriate collective actions for the emotional bonding of the elderly, from creating common production activities to common cultural activities and then to common entertainment space. For example, the rural collective economic organization of a village built 8 "people's stations" and pocket parks, where the elderly can sunbathe, drink tea and play cards, forming a close emotional network imperceptibly. In the construction of the repeated game environment, due to the member stability, property right rigidity and resource sharing of the game environment, the elderly become "members of the same organization". The originally loose "weak ties" with low reciprocity expectations among rural elderly people are "forced" to be catalyzed into close "strong ties" with high trust and low transaction costs.

4. Problems and obstacles in the process of rural collective economic organizations empowering rural elderly care services

Although collective economic organizations have unique functions, they still face multiple obstacles in the process: root problems — derived from the institutional defects of property rights and unbalanced governance structure of rural collective economic organizations themselves; procedural problems — derived from the improper operation of mechanisms in the process of collective economic organizations empowering elderly care.

4.1. Unfair distribution caused by unclear property right definition

Unclear property right definition is mainly manifested in vague property rights, opaque income distribution rules, and unclear rights and interests boundaries among organization members. First, the first problem of unfair distribution caused by unclear property right definition is that a large amount of collective income is used for village-level administrative expenditures, crowding out pension distribution. The long-term limitation of "integration of administration and economy" of collective economic organizations leads to unclear financial expenditure distribution, which restricts the capital allocation of public elderly care services. According to the data of *2023 Statistical Annual Report on China's Rural Policies and Reforms*, the proportion of non-operating expenditures of rural collective economic organizations in total expenditures increased from 63.07% in 2012 to 76.00% in 2023. Taking a village in eastern China as an example, among the total expenditure of 330,000 yuan of the village's collective economic organization in 2022, public expenditures such as village cadres' performance wages, environmental sanitation management, and theme hall operation reached 250,000 yuan, leaving only 80,000 yuan for collective economic development [12]. The second problem is the unfair property right distribution and income dividend of specialized cooperatives. Since the equity setting in specialized cooperatives is mostly inclined to the core members of the village collective, surplus distribution follows the principle of "patronage refund as the main part, dividend by shares as the auxiliary part". Meanwhile, considering information asymmetry, does the equity participation behavior of cooperatives led by collective economic organizations really constitute "patronage"? The third problem is the unfairness caused by widespread free-riding behavior. Collective assets have the attribute of shared enjoyment. In the absence of effective supervision and punishment, it is a common phenomenon that people do not participate in collective affairs, do not perform obligations, but still want to obtain collective income. In addition, the membership of collective economic organizations is non-withdrawable, so even if this phenomenon exists, it is difficult to deprive members of their qualifications and income rights.

4.2. Mismatch between service supply and demand

The mismatch between service supply and demand means that collective economic organizations often follow the "top-down" supply thinking in service supply, leading to a "one-size-fits-all" deviation between service supply and demand, which is concentrated in three dimensions: insufficient elderly-friendliness of services, insufficient precision, and insufficient dynamic adaptability. First, the services are not elderly-friendly enough to meet diverse needs. When providing elderly care services, collective economic organizations tend to focus on visible "hardware investment" while ignoring the "soft services" that the elderly really need. For example, the "health cabins" invested and built by the organization cannot meet the medical needs of the elderly due to the lack of professional medical staff and supporting equipment. Second, insufficient

service precision leads to "one-size-fits-all" solutions. Due to the organization's insufficient ability to collect information and deviation of information content, it is difficult for collective economic organizations to identify the specific needs of different elderly groups. On the one hand, grassroots medical institutions have limited service capacity and insufficient response to chronic diseases, rehabilitation care and other needs. Coupled with the restrictions on the scope of medical insurance reimbursement, the elderly have "difficulty in getting treatment for illnesses". On the other hand, a large number of young healthy elderly people lack institutionalized organization. Mechanisms such as "time bank" and "point system" face problems such as high management costs, low trust, and difficulty in exchange, leading young elderly people to choose to do less or nothing, and resulting in a shortage of caregivers for the advanced elderly. Third, the services have insufficient dynamic adaptability to the elderly and cannot be adjusted with changes in demand. The needs of the elderly are not static. With the growth of age, changes in family conditions and physical health status will show dynamic changes, which conflicts with the static organizational supply.

4.3. Limited delivery level of collective economic organizations

As economic organizations that put grassroots interests first, even if they participate in elderly care services willingly and strategically, their financial support, service quality and handling procedures are still restricted by many factors. Insufficient delivery funds are the result of concurrent problems of source funds and income funds. As a result, collective economic organizations fall into a vicious circle of "no funds — poverty — disappointment of the elderly — difficulty in empowerment". Low delivery quality is manifested in infrastructure, medical level, and product supply quality. In terms of infrastructure, due to insufficient funds and poor supervision, prominent problems such as poor ventilation and unreasonable age-appropriate transformation exist in facilities. In terms of medical supply, the medical service level provided by rural collective economic organizations is low. Although some characteristic health rooms have been set up, they also face problems such as insufficient professional personnel, outdated medical equipment, and weak treatment technology. First, the approval process is complicated: every expenditure of collective economic organizations needs to go through multiple links such as approval by the financial person in charge, accounting by the township accounting center, and signature by the director of the township accounting center. Second, for the elderly, without detailed explanations from professionals or effective consultation channels, it is difficult to understand how to apply for the services provided by rural collective economic organizations and what materials are needed. Finally, due to the weak digital literacy of the elderly, it is difficult for them to apply for business through online platforms, and collective economic organizations also lack such an elderly-friendly online service system. The cumbersome procedures reduce the sense of gain of the elderly: obviously money has been spent and things have been done, but the troublesome procedures greatly reduce the "political effectiveness" of economic organizations participating in elderly care services.

5. Optimization countermeasures for rural collective economic organizations empowering rural elderly care

To eliminate the problems and obstacles in the empowerment process, collective economic organizations need to make comprehensive considerations from three aspects: clarifying property rights, precise demand hierarchy, and high-quality delivery.

5.1. Clarify property right definition to ensure fair distribution of elderly care services

Solving the unfair distribution caused by unclear property right definition requires not only moral education and awareness, but most importantly, establishing clear mandatory rules at the institutional level and putting the rules under public supervision. First, collective economic organizations should establish the awareness of property right definition, clarify property right definition rules, and confirm rights to individuals. Collective assets should be verified and liquidated on a household basis, then specific members participating in shares should be determined, and the quantified equity should be distributed to households and individuals in the form of formal property right certificates (equity certificates, member account cards), so as to ensure the right to know and legal claim of their own shares. Second, in accordance with the proportion of property rights, implement the rule of "patronage as the main part, share-based dividend as the auxiliary part". This income distribution rule applies not only to the income distribution of specialized cooperatives but also to the internal income distribution of collective economic organizations. In terms of empowering elderly care, the proportion of "patronage refund" should be increased, so that elderly people without large shares can obtain corresponding returns by actively participating in collective affairs. Finally, make property right definition public to ensure information transparency. A dual public path of "online + offline" can be established, and an opinion feedback mechanism can be set up to regularly solve the problems of the elderly.

5.2. Build hierarchical systems to ensure the correspondence between supply and demand levels

Collective economic organizations can no longer follow the "top-down" supply thinking, but should adopt the demand logic of "providing what you need". Therefore, the first thing to do is to understand what the elderly really need, stratify them according to their needs, and finally carry out precise matching. For the mismatch of medical supply, it is necessary to build health hierarchy levels and allocate medical resources according to levels. The medical and elderly care needs of rural elderly people can be divided into four levels. The theory emphasizing that different groups need differentiated service matching can also be used to set medical and health levels into different tiers according to the health status, self-care ability and other conditions of the elderly, and set up a dynamic evaluation and adjustment mechanism to avoid fixed and rigid matching. For the problem of labor supply mismatch, it is necessary to train rural elites at different levels, tap left-behind women, and attract returnees. Rural areas do lack human resources, but what is more noteworthy is the lack of channels for "employing people".

5.3. Multi-stakeholder collaboration to promote delivery strategies of funds, quality and processes

Collective economic organizations must break the closed thinking of "going it alone", introduce multiple stakeholders to collaborate, and form a stable "delivery cube". First, for the problem of small and unstable source fund reserves, multi-party collaboration can be adopted to build a diversified fund pool of "collective funds + financial funds + individual family donations + social donations". A fixed proportion of collective funds shall be set aside as elderly care funds every year; strive for county-level governments to include individual tasks of rural elderly care services into the scope of financial payment; encourage children to pre-deposit elderly care service fees for their rural parents through "family affection accounts"; set up village-level elderly care charity funds to

connect with local rural sages, outgoing entrepreneurs and public welfare foundations for donations. One reason for the shortage of income funds is insufficient source funds, and another reason is the inability to fully and effectively utilize idle resources and the lack of ability to convert resources into "cash flow". Therefore, it is necessary for collective economic organizations to cooperate with multiple stakeholders such as strong-village common prosperity companies and rural commercial banks, adopt the cooperation mode of "collectives providing resources, companies providing operation, banks providing loans", revitalize idle and dormant assets, improve resource realization capacity, and enrich the funding sources of elderly care services. Second, the core measure to improve delivery quality is to allocate a certain proportion from source funds and income funds to improve infrastructure, medical level and product supply quality. Finally, the solution to the delivery process problem lies in building a transmission chain of "process allocation - service docking". Each stakeholder carries out precise allocation of delivery processes according to its own functional advantages, conducts chain-type service docking, and supervises during the process, so as to avoid slack operation and errors of each stakeholder in the corresponding process. Process allocation should be disassembled into several nodes.

6. Conclusion

Facing the severe situation of rural elderly care under the superposition of population aging and the Rural Revitalization Strategy, rural collective economic organizations, with their unique subject advantages, have become the key to solving this problem. The innovation of this study lies in breaking the limitation of "parallel evolution without intersection" between the two, and establishing a unique process analysis path of "individual vulnerability - collective resilience - empowerment obstacles - optimization pathways". As core actors, collective economic organizations adopt corresponding strategies in economy, politics and culture, revealing the internal logic with three main purposes: resource integration and redistribution, social participation and guarantee, and emotional bonding and community construction.

The empowerment process has both achievements and obstacles: unfair distribution caused by unclear property right definition, structural mismatch between service supply and demand, and the vicious circle of limited delivery level. In response to the above dilemmas, this paper also puts forward three corresponding optimization pathways: first, clarify property right definition to ensure fair distribution of elderly care services. Second, build a demand hierarchy system to realize precise matching between supply and demand. Third, promote multi-stakeholder collaboration to break through the elderly care limitations of delivery level.

This study also has inevitable limitations in some aspects: restricted by the influence of regional differences, whether the proposed optimization pathways can adapt to individual rural areas needs to be tested in a wider range. Future research can further introduce relevant data and rely on previous data survey results to deeply explore the effectiveness of elderly care services under the governance of collective economic organizations in different regions. Only when collective economic organizations care about every rural elderly person can the achievements benefit rural elderly care services.

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